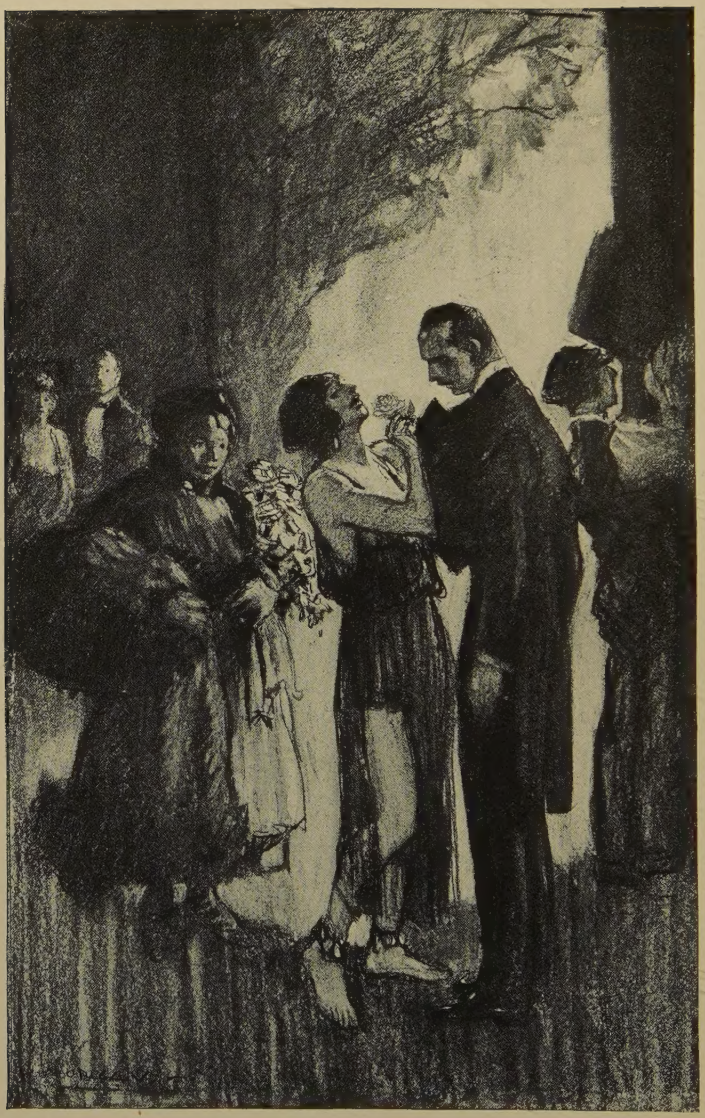
# THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



"So!" she whispered. "They will know from whom that rose comes." FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 148.

# THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

WALLACE MORGAN

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1923

*Copyright, 1923,*
By Little, Brown, and Company.

*All rights reserved*

Published February, 1923

Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS


| | PAGE |
|---|---|
| Introduction | |
| THE COMPACT . . . . . | 3 |
| Conundrum Number One | |
| THE STOLEN MINUTE BOOK . . . . . | 15 |
| Conundrum Number Two | |
| WHAT HAPPENED AT BATH . . . . . | 39 |
| Conundrum Number Three | |
| THE SPIDER'S PARLOUR . . . . . | 97 |
| Conundrum Number Four | |
| THE COURTSHIP OF NAIDA . . . . . | 131 |
| Conundrum Number Five | |
| THE TRAGEDY AT GREYMARSHES . . . . | 167 |
| Conundrum Number Six | |
| THE DUKE'S DILEMMA . . . . . | 205 |
| Conundrum Number Seven | |
| THE GREATEST ARGUMENT . . . . . | 243 |

# ILLUSTRATIONS

"So!" she whispered. "They will know from whom that rose comes" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

PAGE

There were shrieks from the women, and some of the men, amongst them myself, hurried towards the staircase . . . . . 64

"Don't be a fool," I answered. "There's a submerged rock right across here" . . . . . 191

There seemed to be an almost universal gasp of astonishment . . . . . 216

# THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS

# THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS

## INTRODUCTION

### THE COMPACT

The wind, storming up from the sea, beat against the frail little wooden building till every rafter creaked and groaned. The canvas sides flapped and strained madly at the imprisoning ropes. Those hanging lamps which were not already extinguished swung in perilous arcs. In the auditorium of the frail little temporary theatre, only one man lingered near the entrance, and he, as we well knew, with sinister purpose. In the little make-up room behind the stage, we three performers, shorn of our mummer's disguise, presented perhaps the most melancholy spectacle of all. The worst of it was that Leonard and I were all broken up with trying to make the best of

the situation for Rose's sake, yet prevented by circumstances from altogether ignoring it.

"Seems to me we're in rather a tightish corner, Leonard," I ventured, watching that grim figure in the doorway through a hole in the curtain.

"First turn to the left off Queer Street," Leonard admitted gloomily.

Rose said nothing. She was seated in the one chair which went with the portable property, and her head had fallen forward upon her arms, which were stretched upon the deal table. Her hat, a poor little woollen tam-o'-shanter, was pushed back from her head. Her jacket was unfastened. The rain beat down upon the tin roof.

"I'd sell my soul for a whisky and soda," Leonard, our erstwhile humourist, declared wistfully.

"And I mine," I echoed, thinking of Rose, "for a good supper, a warm fire and a comfortable bed."

"And I mine," Rose faltered, looking up and dabbing at her eyes with a morsel of handkerchief, "for a cigarette."

There was a clap of thunder. The flap of canvas which led to the back of the stage shook as though the whole place were coming down. We looked up apprehensively and found that we were no longer alone. A clean-shaven man of medium height, dressed in a long mackintosh and carrying a tweed cap in his hand, had succeeded in effecting a difficult entrance. His appearance, even at that time, puzzled us. His face was perfectly smooth, he was inclined to be bald, his eyes were unusually bright, and there was a noticeable curve at the corners of his lips which might have meant either humour or malevolence. We had no idea what to make of him. One thing was certain, however, — he was not the man an interview with whom we were dreading.

"Mephistopheles himself could scarcely have made a more opportune entrance," he remarked, as the crash of thunder subsided into a distant mutter. "Permit me."

He crossed towards us with a courteous little bow and extended a gold cigarette case, amply filled. Rose took one without hesita-

tion and lit it. We also helped ourselves. The newcomer replaced the case in his pocket.

"I will take the liberty," he continued, "of introducing myself. My name is Richard Thomson."

"A very excellent name," Leonard murmured.

"A more than excellent cigarette," I echoed.

"You are the gentleman who sat in the three-shilling seats," Rose remarked, looking at him curiously.

Mr. Richard Thomson bowed.

"I was there last night and the night before," he acknowledged. "On each occasion I found with regret that I was alone."

No one likes to be reminded of failure. I answered a little hastily.

"You have established your position, sir, as a patron of our ill-omened enterprise. May I ask to what we are indebted for the honour of this visit?"

"In the first place, to invite you all to supper," was the brisk reply. "Secondly, to ask if I can be of any service in helping you to get rid of that bearded rascal Drummond, whom

I see hanging about at the entrance. And in the third place — but I think," he added, after a queer and oddly prolonged pause, " that we might leave that till afterwards."

I stared at him like a booby, for I was never a believer in miracles. The quiver on Rose's lips was almost pathetic, for like all sweet-natured women she was an optimist to the last degree. Leonard, I could see, shared my incredulity. The thing didn't seem possible, for although he was obviously a man of means, and although his manner was convincing and there was a smile upon his lips, Mr. Richard Thomson did not look in the least like a philanthropist.

" Come, come," the latter continued, " mine is a serious offer. Are you afraid that I shall need payment for my help and hospitality? What more could you have to give than the souls you proffered so freely as I came in? "

" You can have mine," Leonard assured him hastily.

" Mine also is at your service," I told him. " The only trouble seems to be to reduce it to a negotiable medium."

"We will make that a subject of discussion later on," our new friend declared. "Mr. Lister," he added, turning to me, "may I take it for granted that you are the business head of this enterprise? How do you stand?"

I choked down the pitiful remnants of my pride and answered him frankly.

"We are in the worst plight three human beings could possibly find themselves in. We've played here for six nights, and we haven't taken enough money to pay for the lighting. We owe the bill at our lodgings, we haven't a scrap of food, a scrap of drink, a scrap of tobacco, a scrap of credit. We've nothing to pawn, and Drummond outside wants four pounds."

"That settles it," our visitor declared curtly. "Follow me."

We obeyed him dumbly. It is my belief that we should have obeyed any one helplessly at that moment, whether they had ordered us to set fire to the place or to stand on our heads. We saw Drummond go off into the darkness, gripping in his hand unexpected money, and followed our guide across the windy space

which led to the brilliantly lit front of the Grand Hotel, whose luxurious portals we passed for the first time. We had a tangled impression of bowing servants, an amiable lift man, a short walk along a carpeted corridor, a door thrown open, a comfortable sitting room and a blazing fire, a round table laid for four, a sideboard set out with food, and gold-foiled bottles of champagne. A waiter bustled in after us and set down a tureen of smoking hot soup.

" You needn't wait," our host ordered, taking off his mackintosh and straightening his black evening bow in the glass. " Miss Mindel, allow me to take your jacket. Sit on this side of the table, near the fire; you there, Cotton, and you opposite me, Lister. We will just start the proceedings so," he went on, cutting the wires of a bottle of champagne and pouring out its contents. " A little soup first, eh, and then I'll carve. Miss Mindel — gentlemen — your very good health. I drink to our better acquaintance."

Rose's hand shook and I could see that she was on the verge of tears. It is my belief that

nothing but our host's matter-of-fact manner saved her at that moment from a breakdown. Leonard and I, too, made our poor little efforts at unsentimental cheerfulness.

"If this is hell," the former declared, eyeing the chickens hungrily, "I'm through with earth."

"Drink your wine, Rose," I advised, raising my own glass, "and remember the mummers' philosophy."

Rose wiped away the tears, emptied her glass of champagne and smiled.

"Nothing in the world," she declared fervently, "ever smelt or tasted so good as this soup."

The psychological effect of food, wine, warmth and tobacco upon three gently nurtured but half-starved human beings became even more evident at a later stage in the evening. Its immediate manifestations, however, were little short of remarkable. For my part, I forgot entirely the agony of the last few weeks, and realised once more with complacent optimism the adventurous possibilities of our vagabond life. Leonard, with flushed cheeks,

a many times refilled glass, and a big cigar in the corner of his mouth, had without the slightest doubt completely forgotten the misery of having to try and be funny on an empty stomach to an insufficent audience. With a little colour in her cheeks, a smile once more upon her lips, and a sparkle in her grey eyes, Rose was once more herself, the most desirable and attractive young woman in the world as, alas! both Leonard and I had discovered. The only person who remained unmoved, either by the bounty he was dispensing or by the wine and food of which he also partook, was the giver of the feast. Sphinxlike, at times almost saturnine looking, his eyes taking frequent and restless note of us, his mouth, with its queer upward curve, a constant puzzle, he remained as mysterious a benefactor when the meal was finished as when he had made his ominous appearance behind the stage at the framework theatre. He was an attentive although a silent host. It was never apparent that his thoughts were elsewhere, and I, watching him more closely, perhaps, than the other two, realised

that most of the time he was living in a world of his own, in which we three guests were very small puppets indeed.

Cigars were lit, chairs were drawn around the fire, Rose was installed on a superlatively comfortable couch, with a box of cigarettes at her elbow, and her favourite liqueur, untasted for many weeks, at her side.

"Let me try your wits," our host proposed, a little abruptly. "Tell me your life history in as few words as possible. Mr. Lister? Tabloid form, if you please?"

"Clergyman's son, without a shilling in the family," I replied; "straight from the 'Varsity, where I had meant to work hard for a degree, to the Army, where after three and a half years of it I lost this," — touching my empty left coat sleeve. "Tried six months for a job, without success. Heard of a chap who had made a concert party pay, realised that my only gifts were a decent voice and some idea of dancing, so had a shot at it myself."

"Mr. Cotton?"

"Idle and dissolute son of a wine merchant at Barnstaple who failed during the war,"

Leonard expounded; " drifted into this sort of thing because I'd made some small successes locally and didn't want to be a clerk."

" Miss Mindel? "

The girl shook her head.

" I am quite alone in the world," she said. " My mother taught music at Torquay and she died quite suddenly. I put my name down for a concert party, and in a way I was very fortunate," she added, glancing sweetly at Leonard and at me. " These two men have been so dear to me and I don't think it's any one's fault that we're such a failure. The weather's been bad, and people stay in their hotels and dance all the time now."

She held out a hand to each of us. She knew perfectly well how we both felt, and she treated us always just like that, as though she understood and realised the compact which Leonard and I had made. So we sat, linked together, as it were, while our host studied us thoughtfully, appreciating, without a doubt, our air of somewhat nervous expectancy. A fine sense of psychology guided him to the conviction

that we were in a properly receptive state of mind. The smile which had first puzzled us played once more upon his lips.

"And now," he said, "about those souls!"

# CONUNDRUM NUMBER ONE

## THE STOLEN MINUTE BOOK

Rose always insisted that she was psychic, and I have some faith myself in presentiments. At any rate, we both declared, on that Monday night before the curtain went up, that something was going to happen. Leonard had no convictions of the sort himself but he was favourably disposed towards our attitude. He put the matter succinctly.

"Here we are," he pointed out, "sold to the devil, body and soul, and if the old boy doesn't make some use of us, I shall begin to be afraid the whole thing's coming to an end. Five pounds a week, and a reserve fund for costumes and posters suits me very nicely, thank you."

"I don't think you need worry," I told him. "It doesn't seem reasonable to imagine that we've been sent to the slums of Liverpool for nothing."

"Then there are those posters," Rose put in, "offering prizes to amateurs. I'm quite certain there's some method in that. Besides ——"

She hesitated. We both pressed her to go on.

"You'll think this silly, but for the last three nights I've had a queer sort of feeling that Mr. Thomson was somewhere in the audience. I can't explain it. I looked everywhere for him. I even tried looking at the people one by one, all down the rows. I never saw any one in the least like him. All the same, I expected to hear his voice at any moment."

"Granted the old boy's Satanic connections," Leonard observed, "he may appear to us in any form. Brimstone and horns are clean out of date. He'll probably send his disembodied voice with instructions."

I strolled to the wings and had a look at the house. Although it still wanted a quarter of an hour before the performance was due to commence, the hall was almost packed with people. The audience, as was natural considering the locality, was a pretty tough lot. It

seemed to consist chiefly of stewards and sailors from the great liners which lay in the river near by, with a sprinkling of operatives and some of the smaller shopkeepers. The study of faces has always interested me, and there were two which I picked out from the crowd during that brief survey and remembered. One was the face of a youngish man, dressed in the clothes of a labourer and seated in a dark corner of the room. He was very pale, almost consumptive-looking, with a black beard which looked as though it had been recently grown, and coal black hair. His features were utterly unlike the features of his presumed class, and there was a certain furtiveness about his expression which puzzled me. A quietly dressed girl sat by his side, whose face was even more in the shadow than his, but it struck me that she had been crying, and that for some reason or other there was a disagreement between her and the young man. The other person whom I noticed was a stout, middle-aged man, with curly black hair, a rather yellow complexion, of distinctly Semitic appearance. His hands were folded

upon his waistcoat, he was smoking with much obvious enjoyment a large cigar, and his eyes were half-closed, as though he were enjoying a brief rest. I put him down as a small shopkeeper, for choice a seller of ready-made garments, who had had a long day's work and was giving himself a treat on the strength of it.

At half-past seven the hall was crammed and the curtain rang up. We went through the first part of our programme with a reasonable amount of success, Leonard in particular getting two encores for one of his humorous songs. At the beginning of the second part, I came out upon the stage and made the little speech which our mysterious patron's wishes rendered necessary.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I have much pleasure in announcing, according to our posters outside, that if there are any amateurs here willing to try their luck upon the stage, either with a song or a dance, we shall be very happy to provide them with music and any slight change of costume. A prize of one pound will be given to the performer whose song meets with the greatest approval, and

a second prize of five shillings for the next most successful item."

I gagged on for a few more minutes, trying to encourage those whom I thought likely aspirants, amidst the laughter and cheers of the audience. Presently a showily dressed young woman threw aside a cheap fur cloak, displaying a low-cut blue satin gown, jumped nimbly on to the stage, ignoring my outstretched hand, and held out a roll of music to Rose, who came smilingly from the background.

"I'll try 'The Old Folks down Wapping Way', dear," she announced, "and don't you hurry me when the sloppy stuff comes. I like to give 'em time for a snivel or two. Sit you down at the piano. I'm that nervous, I can't stand fussing about here."

They bent over the music together and I turned back to the audience. There were only two others who showed any disposition to follow the example of the lady in blue satin. One was the young man whom I had previously noticed, and who had now risen to his feet. It was obvious that the girl by his side was

doing all she could to dissuade him from his purpose. I could almost hear the sob in her throat as she tried to drag him back to his place. I myself felt curiously indisposed to interfere, but Leonard, who was standing by my side, and who saw them for the first time, imagining that a word of encouragement was all that was necessary, concluded the business.

"Come along, sir," he called out. "You look as though you had a good tenor voice, and nothing fetches 'em like it. You let him come, my dear, and he'll buy you a new hat with the money."

The young man shook himself free and stepped on to the platform, obviously ill at ease at the cheer which his enterprise evoked. He was followed, to my surprise, by the middle-aged man whom I had previously noticed.

"Here, Mister," was his greeting, as he stepped on to the platform, "I'll have a go at 'em. Sheeny patter and a clog dance, eh?"

"You must find me some sort of a change," the young man insisted hurriedly.

"And I'll tidy up a bit myself," his rival observed. "We'll let the gal have first go."

I conducted them behind and showed the young man into the men's dressing room.

"You'll find an old dress suit of mine there," I pointed out. "Change as quickly as you can. I don't fancy the young lady will hold them for long."

He nodded and drew me a little on one side. His manner was distinctly uneasy, and his clothes were shabbier even than they had seemed at a distance, but his voice was the voice of a person of education, pleasant, notwithstanding a queer, rather musical accent which at the moment was unfamiliar to me.

"Shall I be able to lock my things up?" he asked, in an undertone. "No offence," he went on hastily, "only I happen to be carrying something rather valuable about with me."

I handed him the key of the dressing room, for which he thanked me.

"How long will that screeching woman be?" he asked impatiently.

"You can go on directly she's finished murdering this one," I promised him. "I don't think they'll stand any more."

He nodded, and I turned back towards

where the other aspirant was standing in the shadow of the wings.

"Now what can I do for you, sir?" I asked. "I don't think you need to change, do you?"

There was no immediate reply. Suddenly I felt a little shiver, and I had hard work to keep back the exclamation from my lips. I knew now that Rose had been right. It was a very wonderful disguise, but our master had at last appeared. He drew a little nearer to me. Even then, although I knew that it was Richard Thomson, I could see nothing but the Jew shopkeeper.

"I shall pretend to make some slight change behind that screen," he said in a low tone. "Come back here when you've taken him on the stage. I may want you."

He disappeared behind a screen a few feet away, and I stood there like a dazed man. From the stage I could still hear the lusty contralto of the young lady candidate. I heard her finish her song amidst moderate applause, chiefly contributed by a little group of her supporters. There was a brief pause. The young lady obliged with an encore. Then the

door of the men's dressing room opened, was closed and locked. The young man, looking a little haggard but remarkably handsome, came towards me, clenching the key in his hand.

"I was a fool to take this on," he confided nervously. "You are sure my things will be all right in there?"

I pointed to the key in his hand.

"You have every assurance of it," I told him.

He fidgetted about, listening with obvious suffering to the girl's raucous voice.

"Ever been in the profession?" I enquired.

"Never," was the hasty reply.

"What's your line to-night?"

"Tenor. Your pianist will be able to do what I want. I've heard her."

"If you win the prize, do you want a job?" I asked, more for the sake of making conversation than from any real curiosity.

He shook his head.

"I've other work on."

"Down at the docks?"

"That's of no consequence, is it?" was the

somewhat curt reply. — "There, she's finished, thank heavens! Let me get this over."

I escorted him to the wings. The young lady, amidst a little volley of good-natured chaff, jumped off the stage and returned to her friends. Her successor crossed quickly towards Rose, who was still seated at the piano. I slipped back behind the scenes. Mr. Richard Thomson was examining the lock of the men's dressing room.

"He's got the key," I told him.

There was no reply. Then I saw that our patron held something in his hand made of steel, which glittered in the light of an electric torch which he had just turned towards the keyhole. A moment later the door was opened and he disappeared. Out on the stage, Rose was playing the first chords of a well-known Irish ballad. Then the young man began to sing, and, notwithstanding my state of excitement, I found myself listening with something like awe. The silence in the hall was of itself an extraordinary tribute to the singer. Shuffling of feet, whispering and coughing had ceased. I felt myself holding my own breath,

listening to those long, sweet notes with their curious, underlying surge of passion. Then I heard Mr. Thomson's voice in my ear, curt and brisk.

"You've a telephone somewhere. Where is it?"

"In the passage," I pointed out.

He disappeared and returned just as a roar of applause greeted the conclusion of the song. The young man hurried in from the stage. The Jew shopkeeper was seated in the same chair, with his hands in his pockets and a disconsolate expression upon his face. Outside, the audience was literally yelling for an encore.

"You'll have to sing again," I told him.

"I don't want to," he declared passionately. "I was a fool to come."

"Nonsense!" I protested, for the uproar outside was becoming unbearable. "Listen! They'll have the place down if you don't."

"I sha'n't go on," his rival competitor grumbled sombrely, thrusting a cigar into his mouth and feeling in his pockets for a match. "You've queered my pitch all right. They're

all Irish down in this quarter. You've fairly got 'em by the throat."

The young man stood still for a moment, listening to the strange cries which came from the excited audience. Suddenly inspiration seemed to come to him. His eyes flashed. He turned away and strode out on to the stage almost with the air of a man possessed by some holy purpose. I followed him to the wings, and from there I had a wonderful view of all that happened during the next few minutes. The young man stood in the middle of the stage, waved his hand towards Rose, to intimate that he needed no music, waited for a few more moments with half-closed eyes and a strange smile upon his face, and commenced to sing. I realised then what inspiration meant. He sang against his will, carried away by an all-conquering emotion, sang in Gaelic, a strange, rhythmic chant, full of deep, sweet notes, but having in it something almost Oriental in its lack of compass and superficial monotony. Again the silence was amazing, only this time, as the song went on, several of the women began to sob, and a dozen or

more men in the audience stood up. Afterwards I knew what that song meant. It was the Hymn of Revolution, and every line was a curse.

From my place in the wings I was able to follow better, perhaps, than any one else in the room, the events of the next sixty seconds. I saw two policemen push their way along the stone passage, past the box office and into the back of the hall, led by a man in plain clothes, a stalwart, determined-looking man with a look of the hunter in his face. Almost at the same moment the singer saw them. His song appeared somehow to become suspended in the air, ceased so abruptly that there seemed something inhuman in the breaking off of so wonderful a strain. He stood gazing at the slowly approaching figures like a man stricken sick and paralysed with fear. Then, without a word, he left the stage, pushed past me, sprang for the dressing room, and, turning the key in the lock, disappeared inside. I followed him for a few yards and then hesitated. Behind, I could hear the heavy, slowly moving footsteps of the police, making their way with

difficulty through the crowd, a slight altercation, the stern voice of the detective in charge. Then, facing me, the young man emerged from the dressing room, ghastly pale, shaking the coat in which he had arrived, distraught, furious, like a man who looks upon madness. Mr. Richard Thomson leaned back in his chair, his mouth open, his whole attitude indicative of mingled curiosity and surprise.

"What you break off for like that, young man?" he demanded. "Have you forgotten the words? You've won the quid all right, anyway."

"I've been robbed!" the singer called out. "Something has been stolen from the pocket of this coat!"

"You locked it up yourself," I reminded him, with a sudden sinking of the heart.

"I don't care!" was the wild reply. "It was there and it is gone!"

He flung the coat to the ground with a gesture of despair. The advancing footsteps and voices were louder now. The man in the plain clothes pushed his way through the

wings, beckoned the police to follow and pointed to the young man.

"The game's up, Mountjoy," he said curtly. "We don't want any shooting here," he added, as he saw the flash of a revolver in the other's hand. "I've half a dozen men outside besides these two."

The trapped man seemed in some measure to recover himself. He half faced me, and the revolver in his hand was a wicked looking instrument.

"Some one has been at my clothes," he muttered, his great black eyes glaring at me. "If I thought that it was you ——"

I was incapable of reply, but I imagine that my obviously dazed condition satisfied him. He turned from me towards where Mr. Richard Thomson was seated, watching the proceedings with stupefied interest, breathing heavily with excitement, his mouth still a little open.

"Or you," the young man added menacingly.

Thomson held out his hands in front of his face.

"You put that up, Mister," he enjoined earnestly. "If you're in a bit of trouble with the cops, you go through with it. Don't you get brandishing those things about. I've known 'em go off sometimes."

The singer's suspicions, if ever he had any, died away. He tossed the revolver to the officer, who had halted a few yards away.

"Better take me out the back away," he advised. "There'll be trouble if the crowd in front gets to know who I am."

The officer clinked a pair of handcuffs on his captive's wrists with a sigh of satisfaction. They moved off down the passage. All the time there had been a queer sort of rumble of voices in front, which might well have been a presage of the gathering storm. I moved back to the wings just in time to see the torch thrown. The girl who had been seated with the young man, suddenly leaped upon a bench. She snatched off her hat and veil as though afraid that they might impede her voice. A coil of black hair hung down her back, her face was as white as marble, but the strength of her voice was wonderful. It rang through the hall

so that there could not have been a person there who did not hear it.

"You cowards!" she shouted. "You have let him be taken before your eyes! That was Mountjoy who sang to you — our liberator! Rescue him! Is there any one here from Donegal?"

Never in my life have I looked upon such a scene. The men came streaming like animals across the benches and chairs, which they dashed on one side and destroyed as though they had been paper. I was just in time to seize Rose and draw her back to the farthest corner when the sea of human forms broke across the stage. Nobody took any notice of us. They went for the back way into the street, shouting strange cries, brandishing sticks and clenched fists, fighting even one another in their eagerness to be first. Until they were gone, the tumult was too great for speech. Rose clung to my arm.

"What does it mean, Maurice?" she asked breathlessly. "Who is he?"

"I have no idea," I answered, "but I can

tell you one thing. To-night has been our début."

"Talk plain English," Leonard begged. "Remember we had to be on the stage all the time."

"It means," I explained, "that we've begun our little job as spokes in the wheel which our friend Mr. Richard Thomson is turning. You remember the other competitor, a man who never sang at all, who looked like a Jew fishmonger in his best clothes?"

"What about him?" Rose demanded.

"He was Mr. Richard Thomson," I told her. "You and I, Leonard, are simply mugs at making up. It was the most wonderful disguise I ever saw in my life."

"That accounts for it," she declared, with a little shiver. "He has been here before, watching. I told you that I felt him around, without ever recognising him."

"Where is he now?" Leonard asked abruptly.

We searched the place. There was no sign of our patron. Just as mysteriously as he had come, he had disappeared. The young lady

in blue satin came up and claimed her sovereign. We went down into the auditorium and inspected the damage. Finally, as we were on the point of leaving, a smartly dressed page came in through the back door and handed me a note. It was dated from the Adelphi Hotel and consisted only of a few lines:

Mr. Richard Thomson presents his compliments and will be glad to see Miss Mindel, Mr. Lister and Mr. Cotton to supper to-night at eleven-thirty.

History repeated itself. When we presented ourselves at the Adelphi Hotel and enquired for Mr. Richard Thomson, doors seemed to fly open before us, a reception clerk himself hurried out with smiles and bows, and conducted us to the lift. We were ushered into a luxurious sitting room on the first floor and welcomed by our host, whose carefully donned dinner clothes and generally well-cared-for appearance revealed gifts which filled me with amazement.

"This is a very pleasant meeting," Mr. Thomson declared, as he placed us at the table and gave orders that the wine should be

opened. "We met last on the east coast, I remember. I trust that you are finding business better?"

"Business is wonderfully good," I acknowledged.

"We turned away money last week," Leonard announced.

There was something a little unreal about the feast which was presently served, excellent though it was, and I am quite sure that we three guests breathed a sigh of relief when at last the table was cleared and the waiter dismissed. Our host lit a cigar and leaned back in his high chair. With the passing of that smile of hospitality from his lips, his face seemed to have grown hard and unpropitious.

"I trust," he said slowly, "that you are all satisfied with our arrangement so far?"

"We are more than satisfied," I assured him, trying to infuse as much gratitude as I could into my tone. "I am thankful to say that we are able to put by a little every week, too, towards the capital which you advanced. The new costumes, songs and posters are bringing something of their own back."

Mr. Thomson waved his hand.

"That is a matter of no concern," he pronounced. "Have you anything further to say?"

I looked at Leonard and at Rose. We all three looked at our host.

"I should like to know," I asked bluntly, "how much of my soul was scotched by to-night's little adventure?"

Mr. Thomson stretched out his hand for the evening paper which the waiter has just placed by his side.

"I do not wish to encourage curiosity," he remarked coldly. "Our bargain renders any explanation on my part unnecessary. You had better read aloud that item in the stop press news, however. It may allay your qualms, if you are foolish enough to have any."

The sheet was wet from the press. I held it under the light and read:—

ARREST OF MOUNTJOY, THE CASTLE DERMOY MURDERER!

Denis Mountjoy was arrested to-night at a music hall in Watergate Street. A determined attempt was made at a rescue, and a

free fight took place outside the Watergate Street police station, all the windows of which were broken. With the arrest of Mountjoy, who will be charged with no less than five murders, it is hoped that the whole conspiracy of which he was the head will be broken up. It is known that he has in his possession the famous minute book of the revolutionary secret society which bore his name, and numerous other arrests may be expected at any moment. The chief constable has received a telephone message of congratulation from Scotland Yard.

I laid down the paper. For the life of me I could not keep back the question which rose to my lips.

"There was five hundred pounds reward for the arrest of Mountjoy. Are you claiming it?"

"Blood money," Mr. Thomson confessed, with a queer smile, "is not in my line."

"It was you who put the police on to Mountjoy?" I persisted.

He made no direct reply. He was stonily thoughtful for a moment.

"I knew," he continued presently, "I believe even the police knew, that Mountjoy was

lying hidden somewhere within a quarter of a mile of Watergate Street. How to draw him out of his hiding place was the problem. I remembered his two failings, — vanity, and love of hearing that beautiful voice of his. I pandered to them."

"You laid a trap on behalf of the police, then?"

Mr. Thomson knocked the ash from his cigar.

"That might be considered the truth," he admitted.

"And the minute book?"

"Concerning the minute book," he replied, "I have nothing to say."

Rose drew her chair a little nearer towards him. The rose-shaded electric light shone upon her fair hair, her wonderful eyes, her piquant face with its alluring smile. She leaned forward towards our host, and it seemed to me that the soft entreaty in her tone and the pleading of her eyes were irresistible.

"Mr. Thomson," she said, "I am a woman, and I am desperately, insatiably curious. I must know — please tell me — what are we —

you and we three? Your confederates, I suppose we are? Are we on the side of the police or the criminal, the informer, or do we come somewhere between? I must adapt my conscience to our position."

Mr. Thomson was unshaken. He looked at Rose just as though she had been an ordinary human being.

"That," he said, "may be put in the category of questions which you will be at liberty to ask me when our agreement comes to an end. Shall we call it Conundrum Number 1? By the bye, if it is any convenience to you to know your movements in advance, I may tell you that you will open at Bath next week."

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER TWO

### WHAT HAPPENED AT BATH

### I

THE thing which surprised me most about the unseen hand which seemed to be always with us was the way in which it disposed of the ladies' orchestra in the Crown Hotel at Bath. I met the pianiste in the street while I was waiting for instructions, and it was she who made the matter plain to me.

"I suppose you have heard that we have finished at the Crown for the present?" she asked.

I had been genuinely surprised to hear that this was the case, and I told her so. After a moment's hesitation, she unburdened herself of a secret.

"Please don't tell a soul," she begged, "except Miss Mindel and Mr. Cotton, if you want

to. The fact of it is, the most extraordinary thing is taking us away. We have been offered, without a word of explanation, a hundred pounds between the four of us to go away for a month."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"It is perfectly true," she repeated. "A lawyer in the city brought the notes and an agreement, absolutely refusing a single word of explanation. We didn't worry very much, I can tell you. Twenty-five pounds isn't picked up every day, but I don't mind confessing that when I think about it, I get so curious it makes me positively ill. Miss Brown's theory is that it's one of these old cranks in the hotel, with more money than he knows what to do with, who hates music. On the other hand, the management has received no complaints, and there's nothing to prevent another orchestra taking our place next Monday."

I made my way to the lounge of the hotel where Leonard, Rose and I had arranged to meet for afternoon tea. We were having rather a quiet time, having already performed

for a week at the local music hall with some success, and were now obeying instructions by staying on at our rooms and waiting for orders. There were too many people about for me to impart the news to them at that moment, so we fell to criticising the passers-by, an uninteresting crowd with one or two exceptions. There was a large but not unwieldly man, carefully dressed, with a walrus-like beard and moustache, heavy eyebrows and a surly manner, who was generally muttering to himself. His name was Grant, he was reputed to be over eighty, to be without a friend in the hotel, and to growl at every one who spoke to him. Every afternoon at half-past four he came in from a turn in his bath chair, and stumped past the orchestra with his finger to his ear. Then there was a frail, olive-skinned man, tall and gaunt, with wonderful black eyes, escorted every day to the baths and brought back again by a manservant who looked like a Cossack. His name was Kinlosti, and he was reported to have been an official at the Court of the late Tsar, and even to have accompanied him to Siberia. The

third person, who interested us because we all detested her, was an enormously fat old lady, with false teeth, false grey ringlets, a profusion of jewellery, and a voice which Leonard said reminded him of the hissing of a rattlesnake. Her name was Mrs. Cotesham, she was stone deaf, and between her and Mr. Grant there was a deadly feud. They never spoke, but if glances could kill both would have been in their coffins many times a day. They both wanted the same chair in front of the fire, they both struggled for the *Times* after lunch, they ordered their coffee at the same moment, and whichever was served last bullied the waiter. They provided plenty of amusement for lookers-on and to the guests generally, but I think that the management, and certainly the waiters, were prepared to welcome the day they left the hotel. When the people had thinned out a little, and there was no one in our immediate vicinity, I told my two companions of the strange thing which had happened to the ladies' orchestra.

"It must have been Mr. Grant," Rose declared.

" I put my money on the old lady," Leonard decided.

But I knew that it was neither, for even while they were speaking the hall porter, who knew me by sight, had brought me a typewritten note, which he said had been left by hand. I tore it open and read. There was no address nor any signature. Neither was needed:

Apply at office of Crown Hotel for permission to give entertainments, commencing soon as possible.

I passed the note on to the others.

" We needn't speculate any more about that hundred pounds," I remarked.

There were no difficulties at the office. The next afternoon, at half-past four, we took the place of the departed orchestra. The change was pleasantly received by the majority of the guests. Mr. Grant, however, while Rose was still in the middle of her introductory pianoforte solo, stumped out of the room with his hand to his ear, and Mrs. Cotesham deliberately turned her chair round and sat with her back to us. On the other hand, Mr. Kinlosti,

passing through the hall leaning on his servant's arm, on his way from his bath, caught sight of Rose at the piano and lingered. He whispered in his servant's ear, found a chair and a table, and seated himself in a dark corner. Presently the latter brought him from upstairs a pot of specially prepared tea and some cigarettes. He remained there throughout the whole of our performance, his eyes fixed upon Rose, — strange, uncanny eyes they were. The corner he had chosen was close to where we were playing, and the flavour of his Russian cigarettes and highly scented tea attracted Rose's attention, so that more than once she turned and looked at him. For the first time I saw a very faint smile part his thin lips.

"A conquest," I whispered to Rose, as I bent over her chair to move some music.

She made a little grimace.

"All the same," she said, "I'd love some of his cigarettes."

That evening, just before the time fixed for the commencement of our performance, another typewritten note was put into my hand,

again unsigned and undated. This is what I read:

It is my wish that if a person of the name of Kinlosti should seek acquaintance with any of you, he should be encouraged. Particularly impress this upon Miss Mindel.

I took Leonard on one side.

"Leonard," I said, "our souls are trash, and what happens to us doesn't matter a damn. But read this!"

Leonard read it and swore.

"Can you get into touch with Thomson?" he asked.

"Only through the banker's address in London," I replied. "Where these typewritten notes drop from not a soul seems to know."

Rose came up and read the message over our shoulders. Her view of the matter was different.

"What fun!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps I shall get some cigarettes."

"You don't suppose we are going to allow this?" I asked hotly.

"Not for one moment!" Leonard echoed.

She laughed softly.

"You idiots!" she exclaimed. "Do you think I can't take care of myself? Or don't you trust me?"

"You know that it isn't that," I rejoined, "but neither Leonard nor I are willing to see you made a cat's-paw of."

"Russians don't know how to treat women," Leonard put in.

She became serious, but she remained very determined.

"Anyhow," she said, "I know how to treat Russians, so please leave me alone. Remember that I, too, am under contract to Mr. Mephistopheles Thomson, and although I love you both, you're not my guardians."

That was the end of the matter, so far as we were concerned. When we commenced our performance, Kinlosti was established in the dark corner, his coffee and a whole box of his inevitable cigarettes before him. His dinner clothes were severe and unadorned, but three wonderful black pearls shone dully in his shirt front. The lounge was more than ordinarily full, for our previous week's performance in Bath had brought us some popularity. Mr.

Grant, however, again stumped out of the place, muttering rudely to himself as he passed us, and the old lady turned her back and tried by means of an ear trumpet to enter into conversation with any one who was unfortunate enough to be near. These two were the only exceptions, however. The rest of the audience was unmistakably friendly.

Leonard and I were to learn something that night of the subtlety of a woman's ways. No one who had been watching could have said that she deliberately encouraged this mysterious admirer. On the other hand, she returned his bold glances with something which I had never seen in her eyes before, something indefinably provocative, certainly with no shadow of rebuke. Her acceptance of his overt admiration was in itself a more significant thing than the frank smiles of a more easily accessible siren. By the time I started off round with the plate for the usual silver collection, I was in such a temper that I found it difficult to pause even for a moment as I reached his corner. He laid a ten-shilling note upon the little pile of silver, and also placed an envelope

there. I saw with gathering anger that it contained something heavy, and that it was addressed to Miss Mindel.

"I have ventured," he said, in a very low and extraordinarily pleasant voice, "to offer for the young lady's acceptance, in return for her delightful music, a little souvenir from the country in which I have lived all my life."

"Miss Mindel does not accept presents from strangers, sir," I said, returning him the envelope.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, stretched out his hand for his jade-headed stick, and, leaning heavily upon it, crossed the floor towards the spot where Rose was seated at the piano, playing soft music. Notwithstanding his lameness, his bow, as he approached her, would have done credit to a courtier.

"May I be allowed," he said, "to congratulate you upon your very delightful singing and playing? It has given so much pleasure to an invalid whose life just now is very monotonous, that I am venturing to ask your accept-

ance of this little trifle, a souvenir from a great country, now, alas! stricken to the earth."

Rose opened the envelope, and held in her hand a quaint ring in which was a black stone. I leaned over her. It was engraved with the royal arms of the Romanoffs, and at the top was a small 'N.'

"I thank you very much indeed," she replied, smiling up at him, "but I could not possibly accept so valuable a gift."

"Will you believe me," he persisted, "that the ring has little, if any, intrinsic value. It is an offering which an artist in a small way might at any time be permitted to present to such gifts as yours."

He passed on towards the lift with a little bow which included all of us, and somehow or other the ring was on Rose's finger, and whether we liked it or not she had accepted it. After that we saw a great deal of Mr. Kinlosti. He was never obtrusive and yet he was persistent. On the day following the presentation of the ring, we somehow found ourselves lunching with him. On the day after that we used his car, and on the following day, al-

though both Leonard and I protested, he took Rose out for a drive alone. She came home sooner than we had expected and was a little silent for the rest of that day. At supper time she took us into her confidence.

"Mr. Kinlosti," she said, "told me a very strange story this afternoon. Parts of it were so horrible that it made me shiver. It seems he was one of the few members of the household who accompanied Nicholas to Siberia. He got away just before the final tragedy."

"What was his excuse for leaving his master?" I asked, a little coldly.

We were all three in the parlour of our lodging house, and quite alone. Nevertheless, Rose lowered her voice as she answered me.

"The Tsar entrusted him with the knowledge of where a portion of the Crown jewels were secreted. He was to find them, raise money, and try and bribe the Siberian Guards. He found the jewels all right, but not until Nicholas and the whole of his family had been assassinated."

"What did he do with the jewels?" Leonard asked.

"He has not told me so in so many words, but I believe that he has them here," she replied. "He told me they were still in his possession and he held them in trust for the Romanoffs. The terrible part of the business for him is that he has been tracked all over Europe by Bolshevist agents, who claim that the jewels belong to the Russian State."

"Why did he tell you all this?" I enquired, with growing suspicion.

Rose shook her head.

"Perhaps to account for the fact that he seemed so nervous all the time," she suggested. "He started whenever another motor car passed us, and as long as we were in Bath itself he watched the faces on the pavements, as though all the time he were looking for some one. He told me that when first he arrived here he suspected even the masseurs at the baths."

"I still don't see why he was so confidential with you," Leonard grumbled.

"He likes me," she acknowledged, with a demure smile. "In fact, if he tells the truth, he likes me very much. Don't look so black,

please," she went on, with a glance at our faces. "Remember I am only obeying orders."

That phrase cost us a good deal of uneasiness during the next few days. Whenever we performed, Kinlosti sat in his corner, watching and listening. In the intervals, he came and made timid and courteous conversation. Without going so far as to say that he pursued Rose, he certainly took up a great deal of her time. On the fourth afternoon I received another typewritten note, handed to me again from the porter's office without any intimation as to its source. There was only a line or two:

Miss Mindel should show some curiosity as to the Crown Jewels. Mr. Kinlosti would probably like to show them to her.

Within half an hour Rose made her request. Both Leonard and I were within a few yards, and we saw the sudden terror in his face, heard his almost hysterical refusal.

"No one has ever seen them," he told Rose, "since they first came into my possession. I do not dare even to look at them myself.

Directly my rheumatism permits me to move without pain, I shall acquit myself of the trust. It weighs upon me night and day."

With that the matter would have been ended, so far as Leonard and myself were concerned. Rose, however, took it differently. For the rest of that afternoon we were able to appreciate fully the guile of our little companion. She received Kinlosti's refusal in silence. Presently she developed a headache and refused to talk. She sat with her shoulder turned away from him while she played and never once glanced in his direction while she sang. At the close of our performance, he came up and whispered to her earnestly. She shook her head at first and then turned to me.

"Mr. Kinlosti is going to show me something in his sitting room. Please come with us."

For the first time I saw the Russian in this sallow-faced invalid. His lips curved into a snarl and for a moment he glared at me. The fit of anger was gone in a moment, before Rose had even observed it. With a little courteous gesture towards her, he turned and

limped towards the lift. We followed, and he led us into his suite on the first floor.

"Do not be frightened of John," he enjoined, as he opened the door. "John is the guardian of my treasure, and he is obsessed with the idea that there are thieves in this hotel."

From the appearance of John, it seemed as though any adventurous thieves would have had a pretty poor time. He was seated with folded arms upon a hard, straight-backed chair. On a table by his side, only partially concealed by a large handkerchief, was an obvious revolver. There was also a glass of strong brandy and water. He rose to his feet at our entrance, but his bearing was grim and unfriendly. His master talked to him for a few moments in his own language, apparently trying to assure him of the harmlessness of our presence. John, however, remained sulky. Kinlosti crossed to the farthest corner of the room, took a key from his pocket, a key which seemed to be attached to a band of snakelike silver which encircled his leg, and unfastened an ordinary black tin dispatch box, which

stood on the floor. From this he drew out a coffer of some almost black-coloured wood, with brass clamps. He held it up towards Rose.

"Even for you, my dear young friend," he said, "I may not raise the lid, but I show you this much of your desire. This is one of the coffers which for eleven hundred years has held the ceremonial jewels of the Russian Royal Family. There were at one time five of them. This is the one that remains."

"Mayn't I have just one little peep inside?" Rose pleaded.

We heard John's heavy breathing, and Kinlosti scarcely waited even to answer her. He thrust the coffer back into the box and locked it.

"It is impossible," he pronounced. "I do not bear this trust alone. In the spirit I fear that I break it already. You will rest here for a little while, mademoiselle?"

If this was meant as a hint to me, it was of no avail. I stood by Rose's side and she shook her head.

"You will not let me make you some of our own Russian tea?" he begged.

"Bring me some downstairs," she suggested. "I should love the tea, if it isn't too much trouble, and I will come over and sit in your corner."

In the corridor, on our way down, we met the malevolent Mrs. Cotesham, who paused, leaning on her stick, and watched Rose and her companion with the hungry glare of the professional scandalmonger. Kinlosti hurried past her with a little shiver, and Rose laughed gaily as she descended the stairs.

"I believe that you have a penchant for Mrs. Cotesham," she declared.

"She is the most horrible old lady I have ever seen anywhere," he said fervently. "They tell me that she is over ninety, and that she has but one joy in life — to make where she can mischief and trouble and unhappiness. She comes here every year, and every servant hates her. Even the managers would keep her away if they could, but she has bought shares in the hotel and has interest with the directors."

" The old man Mr. Grant is nearly as bad," Rose remarked.

" Him I know nothing of," Kinlosti replied, " save that he is one of those who have surely lived too long."

Leonard and I left Rose to her tête-à-tête and took a seat in the lounge. A few yards from us, the little daily comedy which never failed to amuse the onlookers was in progress. Mr. Grant was seated in the easy chair affected by Mrs. Cotesham. She came stumping along from the lift and stopped about a foot from the chair.

" This man has taken my chair!" she exclaimed in a loud voice, for the benefit of every one. " I left a book in it."

Mr. Grant continued to read through his heavy spectacles, unmoved. She struck the side of his chair with her stick.

" I want my chair," she repeated.

Mr. Grant half turned round.

" What does the woman want?" he snarled. " This isn't her chair. It's an hotel chair. I found it empty and I sat down. I am going to stay."

"Where's my book?" Mrs. Cotesham demanded, handing him the end of her ear trumpet.

"I threw it on the lounge," he shouted. "There it is. Now don't bother me any more."

"He calls himself a gentleman!" the old lady declared, shaking with fury.

"Never called myself anything of the sort in my life," he snapped.

I rose, and wheeled the easy chair in which I was sitting to the side of Mr. Grant's.

"Will you sit here, madam?" I ventured. "It is as near your favourite position as possible."

She pushed her speaking trumpet almost into my face.

"Say that again, young man," she directed.

I repeated it at the top of my voice. She nodded and subsided into the chair.

"I don't like having to sit near such people," she said, "but I prefer this side of the fireplace."

Her neighbour looked out of the corner of his eye.

"I wish the pestilential old woman would

stay up in her room," he growled. "I hate her next me."

She handed him her speaking trumpet.

"Say that again, will you?" she invited. "I don't like people talking about me when I can't hear what they say."

Mr. Grant shut his book with a snap, rose to his feet and hobbled across to a distant part of the lounge.

"That old woman ought to be locked up," he declared at the top of his voice. "She's a damned nuisance to everybody!"

He found another seat and recommenced his book. Mrs. Cotesham, with a purr of content, settled herself down in the chair which he had vacated, stretched out her feet upon the footstool and looked around triumphantly.

"I've been to a good many hotels in my life," she confided to every one within hearing, "but I never met a man who called himself a gentleman, with such disgusting manners!"

Leonard and I strolled away presently to find Rose. It was time for us to go back to our rooms and change for the evening performance. We found her with Kinlosti in his

corner, and the air above them overhung with a thin cloud of blue tobacco smoke. Kinlosti was smoking furiously and talking hard. Rose welcomed our approach, I thought, with something almost like eagerness.

"It is time to go, I am sure," she declared, springing to her feet.

Her companion broke off in the middle of a sentence and frowned.

"We speak together to-night, then?"

She shook her head at him, smiling all the time though, and with that little tantalising look in her eyes which Leonard and I both knew so well.

"I am not sure," she replied. "The management will complain if I talk so much with one of the guests, but I will play 'Valse Triste' for you. Au revoir!"

We had almost left the hotel — we were on the outside steps, indeed — when the hall porter caught me up. I saw at once what he was carrying. It was one of the now familiar typewritten letters. This time I asked him a point-blank question.

"Look here," I said, with my hand in my

trousers pocket, " this is the third note I have received from my friend in this fashion. I want to know how they come into your possession. Who leaves them at the bureau? "

The man saw the ten-shilling note in my hand but he only shook his head. I believe that he was perfectly honest.

" I would tell you in a minute if I knew, sir," he declared, " but to tell you the truth I have never seen one delivered. All three I have picked up from the desk in my office, evidently left there when my back was turned for a moment."

" You haven't any idea who leaves them there, then? " I persisted.

" Not the slightest, sir," the man assured me.

" Keep a good lookout," I begged him, " and let me know if you do find out. There may be another one — I can't tell — but I'll double this ten shillings if you succeed."

The man thanked me and withdrew. We three crossed to the less frequented side of the road. I walked in the middle, with Rose and

Leonard on either arm. We read the note together:

If the box Miss Mindel saw in Kinlosti's room was of purple leather, with gold clasps and corners, let the first item in your repertoire to-night be the Missouri Waltz. If it was a box of any other description, play the selection from " Chu-Chin-Chow."

" Well, I'm damned! " Leonard exclaimed.

" Be careful," I advised. " Thomson's probably underneath these paving stones."

Rose shivered a little.

" Do you think he wants to steal the jewels, Maurice? " she asked me.

" Oh, no! " I answered. " He probably wants to borrow them to wear at the Lord Mayor's show! "

She made a grimace.

" That's all very well, Mr. Lister," she said, with a great attempt at hauteur, " but will you kindly remember that you two are not in at this show? It is I who seem to be chosen as principal accomplice. I am not exactly infatuated with Mr. Kinlosti, but I don't want him to lose his jewels."

"I bet you a four-pound box of chocolates he does lose them," Leonard observed.

Rose sighed.

"Anyhow," she murmured, "we shall have to play 'Chu-Chin-Chow' to-night."

Leonard and Rose played a selection from "Chu-Chin-Chow" that evening as well as they could with an extemporised rendering. Rose played the piano, Leonard the violin, and I pretended to be turning over the pages of the music, although all the time I was engaged in a furtive search of the crowded lounge for some sign of our patron or a possible emissary. There were the usual little groups about, and a more harmless or obvious set of people I don't think I ever came across. Mrs. Cotesham was seated with her back to us, with a shawl arranged around her head so as to still further deaden sound, and ostentatiously reading a novel. Mr. Grant had stumped past us on his way to the billiard room, muttering to himself, before the first few bars of our little effort had been played. The others were nearly all known to us by name or reputation. There seemed something uncanny in the

thought that somewhere or other were ears waiting for the message our selection conveyed. We were half-way through the " Cobbler's Song " when, without the slightest warning, Rose, who was facing the staircase, broke off abruptly in her playing. I caught sight of her face, suddenly pale, upturned towards the head of the staircase, followed the direction of her gaze, and was myself stricken dumb and nerveless. At the top of the staircase John was standing, holding out a terrified, struggling figure almost at arm's length. The fingers of his right hand seemed to be clasped around the neck of his unfortunate victim, while with his left hand he held him by the ankle. This was all in full view of the lounge. There were shrieks from the women, and some of the men, amongst them myself, hurried towards the staircase. We were too late, however, to be of any practical use. John, who seemed like a man beside himself with passion, suddenly swung the prostrate form of his captive a little farther back, and then dashed it from him down the stairs. A little cry of horror rippled and sobbed through the

There were shrieks from the women, and some of the men, amongst them myself, hurried towards the staircase. *Page* 64.

tense air. The man lay on the rug at the bottom of the stairs, a crumpled-up heap, motionless and without speech.

## II

I was one of those who helped to carry the unfortunate victim of John's fury into the manager's office. He appeared to be a man of about medium height and build, dressed in the severest clerical clothes. I remembered having seen him arrive on the previous day. We laid him upon a sofa and left him there while one of us telephoned for a doctor. Out in the lounge, every one was grouped around the stairs, where Kinlosti was talking to John. The veins of the latter's temples were still standing out, but he was rapidly calming down. He spoke in a loud voice, so that every one might hear.

"That man is a thief in disguise," he shouted. "You will find burglar's tools in his pocket and a revolver. He came into the room where I was guarding my master's property, pretended to have mistaken the room, and tried

to slip in behind me. I was too quick for him. He has followed us from Russia, that man. My master will tell you."

The manager, who had been lingering in the background, came down the stairs.

"The man's story may be true," he said. "Two of the maids saw him hanging about. They heard the altercation, and there is a chloroformed handkerchief in the sitting room."

"I have a valuable box there," Kinlosti explained, "which it is my servant's duty to guard. It contains property which belongs to the dead."

"All the same," one of the bystanders observed, "one does not treat even a thief like that. The man's neck is probably broken."

Kinlosti seemed to have lost his nervousness in this minute of crisis.

"I beg," he said to the manager, "that you will await the doctor's verdict before you send for the police. If the man is not seriously injured, he got no more than his deserts. It was John's duty to guard what he was guarding with his life."

"Here is the doctor," the manager announced.

Half a dozen of us followed the manager and the doctor back to the room where we had carried the injured man. When we opened the door, however, we were faced with a great surprise. There was a current of cold air, the window was wide open, the sofa was empty! To all appearance, a miracle had happened. We examined the ground below the window and found traces of where a man had stepped out. To those of us who had seen the fall, the thing grew more wonderful the more we thought of it.

"I think," the doctor pronounced, "that this is more a case for the police."

Kinlosti shook his head.

"I do not think," he said drily, "that the police of Bath are likely to be of much service in this matter."

"You have a suspicion, perhaps?" the manager asked.

Kinlosti smiled a little bitterly.

"I know the people who have been following me," he replied, "who would follow me

"I shall order my car and depart. It will perhaps be better. If things get worse, they may commandeer the petrol. I will rid myself of this responsibility and either return or try Harrogate. You three will come up and have a bottle of wine with me and some sandwiches?"

Rose, to my joy, was quite firm in her refusal. She returned with him to his corner, however, and they sat there with their heads very close together whilst Leonard and I fidgetted about in the lounge. A period of quietude had followed the excitement of the last half-hour. Mr. Grant had apparently fallen asleep in his easy chair. Mrs. Cotesham watched him malevolently through her horn-rimmed spectacles.

"What a pity for a man to make such ugly noises when he's asleep!" she remarked to her neighbour. "I wish some one would wake him up. He's disturbing the whole room."

Mr. Grant opened one eye, then the other. Finally he sat up.

"Madam," he shouted, as she raised her

trumpet to her ear, " you forget that I am not like you — deaf! "

" I don't care whether you are or not," she replied. " I'm glad I woke you up. Bed's the place for you."

" A coffin's the place for you," Mr. Grant muttered under his breath. " How are you going to get away from here, ma'am? " he continued, raising his tone. " I hear your rooms are let from to-morrow."

" I sha'n't ask you for a place in your car," she answered. " Very likely I sha'n't go. They can't turn me out."

" I don't think they'll miss the opportunity," her interlocutor retorted, with a sardonic smile.

She laid her speaking trumpet in her lap.

" I sha'n't listen to you any more," she declared. " You're a rude old man. If it interests any one else to know what will become of me, I have relatives in Bristol who will be only too glad for me to pay them a visit."

" They'll be gladder to get rid of her," Mr. Grant observed, looking around for sympathy.

At that moment the hall porter touched me

on the shoulder. The inevitable note was thrust into my hand.

"I found this on my desk just now, sir," he announced, in answer to my look of enquiry. "Sorry I can't tell you how it got there."

I opened it and read:

You will terminate your engagement at the Crown this evening. Proceed to London tomorrow, where you will find rooms taken for you at the Mayfair Hotel. Accept any offer you may receive of a lift to London, individually or collectively.

I showed Leonard the note, and hurried away to the manager's office. He made no difficulty about letting us go; in fact, I gathered that half the residents in the hotel were hurrying away by motor car, fearing a general confiscation of petrol. He detained me just as I was leaving the room.

"Queer affair, that attempted robbery, Mr. Lister," he remarked.

"Extraordinary," I agreed.

"I notice you people seem quite friendly with Mr. Kinlosti," he continued. "Do you

know if it is true that he is related to the late Tsar?"

"I have no idea," I answered. "All that he has told us is that he was a member of the household."

"He may be a nobleman, and I dare say he is," the manager went on, a little nervously, "but I don't care about people at my hotel with a savage manservant like his and half a million pounds' worth of jewels. Bath isn't the place for that sort of thing. My clients like a quiet life."

"No doubt," I answered. "Anyhow, he's leaving to-morrow."

"Prince or no prince, I am glad to hear it," was the heartfelt reply. "People ought to deposit valuables like that in a bank. They're simply asking for trouble when they cart them about the country. It's a thing I've very seldom done to a client, but I told Mr. Kinlosti this evening that I should be glad for him to leave as soon as convenient."

I went back to the corner where I had left Rose. My disquietude increased as I approached. Both she and her companion were

quite unconscious of my coming. Kinlosti was leaning forward, talking earnestly, and Rose was listening with a queer and unfamiliar look in her eyes. Leonard suddenly gripped me by the arm and led me a little distance away.

"Maurice," he confided, "that fellow Kinlosti is making love to her."

"If I thought so!" I muttered, clenching my fists.

"But she's letting him," Leonard groaned. "What the mischief can we do? We've no hold over her. Owing to that silly bargain we made, she doesn't dream that either of us care a snap of the fingers about her, except as a little pal and a partner. It's all clear sailing for that unwholesome brute."

My anger died away, but a very solid determination was there in its place.

"Leonard," I said, "we aren't going to leave her, and whatever happens, we'll know more about that fellow before many days have passed."

I retraced my steps then and went up to them. There was certainly a change in Rose's

face. Kinlosti looked up at me a little impatiently.

"Is it late?" he asked. "I am leaving to-morrow, and I am anxious to have a few minutes' more conversation with Miss Mindel."

"As it happens, we are leaving ourselves," I replied. "I thought perhaps that Miss Mindel would like to know."

"What, to-morrow?" she exclaimed.

"I have received a message," I told her.

She sprang up and drew me to one side, with a little nod to Kinlosti which seemed to promise a swift return. I showed her the typewritten sheet.

"Maurice," she whispered, "Mr. Kinlosti has already been begging me to accept a seat in his car to London to-morrow."

"Indeed!" I answered coldly.

"Of course, I never had any idea of leaving you two," she went on, "but now — well, you see what our instructions are."

"Damn our instructions!" I muttered, losing control of myself for a moment. "Rose, you're not falling in love with that fellow?"

"Don't be foolish, please," she answered, "and don't call him a fellow."

"I'll call him a scoundrel if he behaves like one," I retorted.

She looked at me queerly for a moment. I thought that she was going to be angry, but she answered me without any signs of ill-feeling.

"You and Leonard are both very kind in looking after me," she admitted, "but after all I am quite able, when it is necessary, to make up my mind for myself on things that concern me personally."

"You're not going up to London alone with Kinlosti," I said doggedly.

She swung around and rejoined him before I could reply. Leonard and I went and fetched our coats and hats. A little ostentatiously we laid her fur coat upon the top of the piano and waited. In a moment or two she got up and came over towards us, Kinlosti by her side. He turned courteously to me.

"Miss Mindel reminds me that you also are leaving Bath to-morrow. I have two seats in my car, one of which I have offered to Miss

Mindel. If the other is of any service to you, I shall be delighted."

I thanked him a little perfunctorily.

"We don't, as a rule, separate when we have a journey to make," I said. "However, in this case the circumstances are a little exceptional. If you will take Miss Mindel and Mr. Cotton, I dare say I can manage to get up somehow."

"We can't leave you, Maurice," Rose protested.

"So far as I am concerned, I am afraid it must be so," Kinlosti intervened, in a tone full of courteous regret. "I have John outside with the chauffeur, and there is only room for two comfortably in the inside. We shall have to improvise a seat for Mr. Cotton."

"You don't anticipate any adventures on the way, I suppose?" I asked. "Nothing after the style of this evening's happenings?"

"I sincerely trust not," was the earnest reply. "However, both John and I are armed, and I do not think any one will venture so far as to hold up the car."

"In that case, Rose," I said, "I think you and Leonard had better accept Mr. Kinlosti's

"Don't be foolish, please," she answered, "and don't call him a fellow."

"I'll call him a scoundrel if he behaves like one," I retorted.

She looked at me queerly for a moment. I thought that she was going to be angry, but she answered me without any signs of ill-feeling.

"You and Leonard are both very kind in looking after me," she admitted, "but after all I am quite able, when it is necessary, to make up my mind for myself on things that concern me personally."

"You're not going up to London alone with Kinlosti," I said doggedly.

She swung around and rejoined him before I could reply. Leonard and I went and fetched our coats and hats. A little ostentatiously we laid her fur coat upon the top of the piano and waited. In a moment or two she got up and came over towards us, Kinlosti by her side. He turned courteously to me.

"Miss Mindel reminds me that you also are leaving Bath to-morrow. I have two seats in my car, one of which I have offered to Miss

Mindel. If the other is of any service to you, I shall be delighted."

I thanked him a little perfunctorily.

"We don't, as a rule, separate when we have a journey to make," I said. "However, in this case the circumstances are a little exceptional. If you will take Miss Mindel and Mr. Cotton, I dare say I can manage to get up somehow."

"We can't leave you, Maurice," Rose protested.

"So far as I am concerned, I am afraid it must be so," Kinlosti intervened, in a tone full of courteous regret. "I have John outside with the chauffeur, and there is only room for two comfortably in the inside. We shall have to improvise a seat for Mr. Cotton."

"You don't anticipate any adventures on the way, I suppose?" I asked. "Nothing after the style of this evening's happenings?"

"I sincerely trust not," was the earnest reply. "However, both John and I are armed, and I do not think any one will venture so far as to hold up the car."

"In that case, Rose," I said, "I think you and Leonard had better accept Mr. Kinlosti's

offer. At the worst I hear there are some char-à-bancs running. I shall probably get a lift. At what hour did you think of starting?"

"At nine o'clock, if Miss Mindel doesn't mind," Kinlosti answered hastily. "The sooner we get away, the better. My chauffeur tells me that they are asking two pounds a tin for petrol, and a Government order, commandeering stocks, is expected out to-morrow."

We were more silent than usual on our walk home, perhaps because the events of the evening had left us all something to think about. Once Rose pressed my arm.

"I feel rather mean about you to-morrow, Maurice," she ventured.

I reminded her of the mandate we had received.

"No help for it. Two were invited and two have to go. I can't tell what surprises may be in store for me. I may get an invitation myself."

Rose turned a troubled face towards me. Her lips quivered a little, her eyes were full of distress.

"Maurice," she confessed, "I'm afraid of

to-morrow. I'm afraid that we are being made use of to rob Mr. Kinlosti."

"Can't be helped," Leonard put in, as I remained for a moment silent. "We took this business on with our eyes open. Our consciences weren't very active when we were starving and cold and in debt. It's no good finding them too sensitive now that we're living on the fat of the land. We've just got to see the thing through, for a year, at any rate."

"Leonard is right," I assented. "We've got to grin and bear it. This time," I added, "it seems as though you two were going to have the show to yourself."

"You can have my share," Rose sighed.

The hall of the Crown Hotel at a few minutes before nine on the following morning presented a scene of curious animation. All trains had ceased to run, and rumours as to the Government commandeering of petrol were universal. Fully a score of cars were outside, waiting, besides one of the smaller char-à-bancs, and half a dozen luggage porters were working their hardest. Kinlosti, looking

curiously shrunken in a great fur coat, pale and nervous, greeted us on the steps. His car, laden with luggage, stood at the entrance. On the box seat sat John, an immovable figure of fierce watchfulness.

"We could start any time you liked," Kinlosti said, addressing Rose eagerly. "We have left room for your trunk behind, and there will be a quite comfortable place for Mr. Cotton. You are ready, Miss Mindel?"

"Quite," she answered.

He gripped Leonard's arm and commenced to descend the steps. It was obvious that he was in great pain, and I supported him on the other side. Outside, a grey mist hung over the street, and he shivered as we made our slow progress.

"It is the damp which has brought this on again," he confided. "Only a few days ago I was better. Every one says the same thing. It is when one leaves here that one reaps the benefit of the treatment. I am ashamed to be so much trouble."

We had almost to lift him into the car, and notwithstanding the chill of the morning, there

were beads of perspiration upon his forehead. Rose took her place by his side, and Leonard on a camp stool placed against the door. I felt a little forlorn as I saw them start, but I waved my hand encouragingly.

"I'll get up somehow," I shouted. "See you to-night."

I turned back into the hotel to look for the driver of the char-à-banc and try to bargain with him for a seat to London. Mrs. Cotesham, almost undistinguishable in rugs and wraps, was seated on a chair, watching the carrying out of her luggage, all neatly wrapped, after the continental fashion, in brown holland covers. She counted the articles one by one as they passed, muttering to herself all the time.

"Never another shilling shall any railway porter have so long as I live! — eleven — one more. And as to the management of this hotel, I call it disgraceful! Flung out like cattle, that's what's happening to us!"

Mr. Grant, also attired for motoring, came shuffling along. He picked up Mrs. Cotesham's speaking trumpet.

"Got any one to take you in?" he asked.

She snatched it away from him.

"Of course I have," she answered. "I'm not a miserable, disagreeable old curmudgeon like you! My friends are glad to have me pay them a visit."

Mr. Grant chuckled.

"Gladder to get rid of you, I know!"

His eye fell upon me.

"Well, young Mr. Musician," he went on, "how are you going to get away? Pad the hoof, eh, as your sort used to a few hundred years ago?"

"Not at all," I answered cheerfully. "I'm hoping some one will offer me a lift to London. If not, I shall have to buy a seat for myself in the char-à-banc."

The hall porter, who was passing, shook his head.

"Not a bit of use thinking about the char-à-banc, sir," he said. "We've a dozen guests in the hotel we've had to refuse already."

Mr. Grant chuckled.

"Good walker, eh, young man?" he asked.

"Oh, I could get there, all right," I assured

him, "but it won't be necessary. Why won't you give me a lift, sir?" I added, putting a bold front on it. "I see your car out there, empty."

"Yes, why don't you give the poor young man a ride?" Mrs. Cotesham chipped in, lowering the speaking trumpet from her ear. "Fancy wanting all that great car to yourself! I hate selfishness."

Mr. Grant smiled.

"I couldn't persuade you, my dear lady ——" he began.

"No, you couldn't!" she interrupted vigorously. "I wouldn't step inside your old car if you paid me. I'm not going your way, either. I'm going to Clifton. And I hope that as long as I live I'll never set eyes upon your repulsive face again."

Mr. Grant lifted his hat solemnly.

"Amen!" he said. "Come on, young fellow," he added gruffly. "I'll take you to London as long as you promise not to try and sing to me."

I spared my benefactor any exuberant show of gratitude, but I felt that I was in luck's way

as I stretched myself out in the luxuriously cushioned seat of Mr. Grant's limousine. We swung off along the Bristol road.

"Got to call at a house three miles out on this road," Mr. Grant explained thickly. "We'll be in London before the fastest of them, though."

"It's quite immaterial to me so long as we get there by this evening," I answered.

We drove on for between three and four miles. Then, without any order from Mr. Grant, the car came to a standstill by the side of the road. I looked at my companion for some explanation. He was leaning a little forward, with both hands clasped around the knob of his stick. His attitude was one of listening.

"Is the house where you want to call near here?" I asked.

"Listen!" was the brusque reply.

I thrust my head out of the window of the car and held my breath. Climbing the hill behind us, hidden by the mist, was another car, puffing and snorting as though in some difficulties. It came into sight in a minute or

two—a Bath taxicab, laden with luggage. Mr. Grant descended.

"Something wrong with that engine," he remarked. "Perhaps we had better enquire if we can help."

The car behind had come to a standstill, and the chauffeur, who had already jumped from his place and opened the bonnet, was tinkering with his engine. I fancied that a glance of intelligence passed between him and Mr. Grant.

"Dear me," the latter exclaimed, turning around and finding me at his heels. "Our amiable old friend on her way to Bristol! We must see whether we cannot be of some assistance."

What followed — the rapidity and the wonder of it — kept me spellbound. There was no stump about Mr. Grant as he threw open the door of the taxicab. His spring was the spring of a young man, and before I could realise what was happening, he had Mrs. Cotesham by the throat. With the other hand he passed out to me the box which she had been using as a footstool.

"The game's up, Kinlosti," he said, and the voice was the voice of Thomson. "I'll shake the life out of you if you reach for that pistol."

For a moment I stood in the middle of the road, spellbound. The pseudo Mrs. Cotesham was a wonderful sight. Her false front and mass of grey curls had slipped over her ear, disclosing the clean-shaven head of a young man. The paint was cracking upon her face. Thomson's terrible grip seemed to be slowly strangling her, and slowly from out of the wreck there seemed to creep another face, the face of a man with Kinlosti's haunting eyes. He seemed to wrench himself at that moment a little freer from the cruel grip upon his windpipe, and a cry of terror rang out into the mist, the thrilling, horrible cry of a man in fear of his life. The cry was stifled by something which Thomson held in his hand. He turned to me.

"Get back in the car and take that box with you," he directed.

I obeyed him, glad enough to be away from whatever else might happen. In a minute or two Mr. Thomson returned. He gave a brief

order to the chauffeur, the car swung round, and we headed once more for Bath. As we flashed past the taxicab, I caught a momentary glimpse of its amazing occupant, leaning forward, his face buried in his hands. The taxicab man had lit a cigarette and was waiting apparently for orders.

"Sha'n't we be stopped?" I asked my companion. "He can telephone."

Mr. Thomson shook his head.

"The game isn't played that way," he said shortly.

Whereupon he put his feet on the opposite cushion and either slept or pretended to sleep until we reached Hungerford. Then he yawned and looked at me.

"Can you hold out until we reach London?" he asked. "I don't want to stop for luncheon."

"Easily," I replied. "I had a good breakfast, and to tell you the truth," I added boldly, "I'm too curious to be hungry."

Mr. Thomson yawned and closed his eyes again.

"You can keep your curiosity and your

appetite, too, if you like," he said, " until eight o'clock this evening, Milan Restaurant — not Grill Room."

" All three of us? " I asked.

" Yes."

Mr. Thomson closed his eyes, and not another word was spoken until he set me down at the Mayfair Hotel.

It was evidently not only at hotels that Mr. Thomson was *persona grata.* The table to which he led us on our arrival at the Milan was one of the best in the room. The chief *maître d'hôtel* himself was in attendance to exchange amenities with an evidently well-known and respected patron. The menu of a specially prepared dinner was deferentially handed to him by one of the minor luminaries. We seated ourselves with some faint return of that unreal feeling which had been evoked by the two previous feasts at which we had assisted. This one especially was hard to realise. Nowhere could the appurtenances of luxury have been more elaborately displayed. Pink, hothouse roses almost covered the tablecloth

and gave a faint, exotic odour to the restful atmosphere of the room. Outside, the orchestra was playing with subdued and melodious cadence the music of "Louise." We seemed in an oasis, in a world far removed from the tragedies of the day.

"I fear," our host said, as he watched the wine being poured into Rose's glass, "that your journey up to-day has fatigued you. I beg that you will drink half a glass of that wine at once. There is nothing so refreshing as champagne after a long motor ride."

"It wasn't the distance," Rose replied, as she followed his advice. "It was Mr. Kinlosti's extraordinary behaviour. I have never seen a man so nervous in all my life. He could not sit still. He seemed to lose sometimes almost the power of speech. Always he seemed to be expecting something which never happened."

"Ah!" Mr. Thomson murmured. "That is not to be wondered at."

"When we neared London," Rose continued, "and I ventured to congratulate him upon the near fulfilment of his trust, I cer-

tainly thought he would have hysterics. We left him at Hammersmith, telephoning wildly. After waiting half an hour, we moved our things into a taxi."

"Things did not turn out," Mr. Thomson reflected, "exactly as Mr. Kinlosti had anticipated."

"It has been your custom, sir," I reminded him, leaning forward in my place, "on the occasion of these little celebrations, to vouchsafe us some slight inkling as to the meaning of our efforts. I feel that we should do more justice to this wonderful dinner if you could give us some faint idea as to the nature of the tragedy, or farce, or whatever it may be, at which we have been assisting."

Mr. Thomson ruminated for a moment. He seemed to be watching two unobtrusive-looking men, still in morning dress, who were making their way through the room towards the more retired tables set out on the balcony.

"That is true," he admitted. "I will tell you, then, a little history. It may perhaps bring some part of the colour back to Miss Mindel's cheeks."

"It may also," I observed, "stop me from thinking I can see two of everything."

"A month ago," Mr. Thomson said, "there landed in England three of the greatest rascals who ever drew breath in any country. One was Andrea Kinlosti, at one time valet and barber to the Tsar of Russia. The other was Paul Kinlosti, his brother, an actor of some small note in a stock company at St. Petersburg. The third was a hardened criminal, whom, not to confuse you, we will call John, wanted even in his own country for something like thirteen murders. Andrea Kinlosti was the gentleman, Miss Rose, who brought you to London today. Paul Kinlosti, the actor, gave a very wonderful rendering of Mrs. Cotesham. And John — well, you know about him."

"Andrea Kinlosti's story, then," Rose began ——

"A tissue of lies," our host interrupted. "The true facts about his appearance in England are these. A very valuable portion of the Crown jewels was hidden by one of the Monarchist party in St. Petersburg. Partly through Andrea Kinlosti's intervention, these

jewels fell into the hands of the Bolshevists. The two Kinlostis and John, however, managed to secure possession of them and escaped to England. Hard on their heels came four or five of their kidney, and the attempt you saw at theft at the Crown Hotel was the third or fourth which has been made since they arrived in this country. In the absence of any extradition treaty between the present Government of Russia and this country, the trio thought that they would be safe here and could make their plans to realise the jewels. They did not count, however, upon the little stream of fellow rascals who found their way over here after them. The Bath idea seems fantastic, but on the whole it had its points. Andrea was really suffering horribly from rheumatism, and an hotel of the class of the Crown seemed as good a hiding place as any from the kind of person whom they desired to avoid. The scheme was that Kinlosti should be quite frank about his possession of the jewels, but the box which was supposed to contain them was a dummy. Paul, the actor, impersonated an old lady and was really in

possession of the jewels, and the idea was that he should watch his opportunity and take steamer direct from Bristol to some little port at which he could reship to New York."

We murmured comprehension.

"Miss Mindel here," Thomson continued, "kept admirably in touch with Andrea Kinlosti, the pseudo-nobleman. She was able to give me the information I desired, as to which of the two really possessed the jewels. Furthermore, directly Andrea sought her companionship for the journey to London, I knew that it was Paul who was to have the jewels. Upon the whole," he concluded, "for two arch criminals of wonderful reputation, I think their final attempt to get away with the booty was a little disappointing."

"What has happened to them?" Rose asked.

Mr. Thomson picked up the evening paper which he had placed by the side of his plate.

"This is just a telegram," he observed, turning to the stop press news:

> Just before the sailing of the S. S. *Avonmouth* from Bristol this afternoon, the body of an elderly lady, who had

booked a passage to Jamaica in the name of Mrs. Cotesham, was found in her cabin. It is feared that the deceased lady was the victim of foul play, as there were marks of strangulation upon her throat, and her property had apparently been rifled.

LATER.

Further extraordinary revelations concerning the murder on the *Avonmouth* have just come to hand, from which it appears that the deceased was a man in woman's clothes.

"What made him go on?" I asked.

Mr. Thomson smiled.

"A little information I whispered to him," he said, "concerning the movements of some of his cutthroat friends from Russia. They were hard on his track, as this paragraph proves."

"And what about — the other one?" Rose asked, in a stifled, breathless voice — "the one I travelled up with?"

"Andrea," Mr. Thomson replied. "I am afraid, Miss Mindel, that he is a very bad lot indeed. If I had not been sure that your

protection was adequate, I should certainly have hesitated before I asked you to play Delilah."

"I am still wondering," Rose murmured, "what has become of him."

Mr. Thomson had been watching the progress of three men through the crowded restaurant. By a silent gesture he invited her attention to them. The foremost figure was the man whom we had known as Andrea Kinlosti, behind him the two unobtrusive-looking men who had passed through the restaurant a few minutes before. Kinlosti looked neither to the right nor to the left; his cheeks were ashen pale, his dark eyes more brilliant and sunken than ever. The two men who followed watched his every movement with catlike intensity. When they had passed into the lounge, they drew one on either side of him.

"He is in luck," Mr. Thomson said grimly. "Scotland Yard has a pretty black record against him since his last visit to England, six or seven years ago, but if it had been the others — I don't think they would have been so kind to him as they were to his brother. And now

that's the end of my story," he went on, in an altered tone. "Miss Mindel, I am assured that this young turkey is as tender as the chestnut stuffing. Lister, you ought to have an appetite, for I did you out of your lunch. Cotton, a glass of wine with you."

I think that a certain callousness, born of our recent adventures, was finding its way into our natures, for each one of us responded cheerfully to our host's invitation. There was one — the great question — however, which I could not refrain from asking.

"About those jewels, sir — where are they?" I asked.

Mr. Thomson scratched his chin.

"Young man," he replied, "don't you think you'd be better off without knowing where half a million pounds' worth of jewels are?"

"That isn't what I meant," I persisted. "You seem to have recovered them from the original thieves. What are you going to do about it?"

Mr. Thomson smiled.

"Let me see," he observed, "that will be Conundrum Number Two."

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER THREE

### THE SPIDER'S PARLOUR

We three — Leonard Cotton, Rose Mindel and I, Maurice Lister, who comprised the much-advertised little troupe of English artistes recently arrived at Brussels — sipped the very excellent black coffee provided for our delectation by Monsieur Huber, the proprietor of the Quatres Etoiles, gazed around with interest at the motley crowd by which we were surrounded, applauded the performance of a little French soubrette upon the stage with all the abandon required by fellow artistes, and exchanged mutual smiles of well-being and content. To tell the truth, the Café des Quatres Etoiles, its clientele, and the character of the entertainment provided were nothing so very wonderful, but it was our first glimpse of foreign life for some five or six years. We were young and athirst for adventure, and

with our unseen patron behind us we were pretty certain that before long we should be brought into touch with interesting things. So far we had spent a week in Brussels, and no word had followed the mandate which had sent us there. We had been perfectly content, however, to wait our time and take our nightly part in the performances. Rose had made quite a hit with her topical songs and graceful dancing. Leonard's droll stories were much appreciated by an audience which during the last four years had received a mighty English lesson. My own baritone songs were well enough received, and we thoroughly enjoyed the cosmopolitan habit established at the little music hall of coming down to one of the tables in the café between our turns and taking our place amongst the audience. Rose was somewhat of a responsibility to us, but since the affair Kinlosti she had shunned all new acquaintances and was quite content that we should play the part of watchdogs. Even as we sat there that evening, she received with the pleasant indifference of the true artiste many admiring, many inviting glances. Prosperity

had agreed with Rose, as I suppose it had also with Leonard and me. The slight thinness of her face, the discontented curl of the lips, had vanished. Her cheeks had filled out, those wonderful blue eyes of hers seemed always soft and full of life. She had a perpetual and distracting smile upon her lips; she moved as one who walks on air. "The little lady," Monsieur Huber had said to us on the evening of our first performance, "has the gaiety of Paris. It is incredible that she is of London. She makes happiness wherever she goes." And, by the bye, Mr. Huber was not accustomed to overpraise any artiste to whom he was in the habit of paying a salary.

"Maurice — and you, old solemn-face," Rose said, turning to Leonard, "I like this place. I am prepared to enjoy myself here. I am more glad than ever that I sold my soul."

"I am entirely with you," Leonard assented, "so long as the future does not present any such penalties as the incarceration of the body."

"You're all right," I reminded him. "I'm the person who nearly found trouble. A few

more paragraphs about that mysterious jewel robbery and the probability of immediate arrest would have sent me into a nervous decline."

Rose laughed in my face, her white teeth gleaming. The little creases at the corners of her eyes deepened.

"Rubbish!" she scoffed. "You know perfectly well that you never turned a hair."

"As a matter of fact," I admitted, "I am beginning to have confidence in Mr. Mephistopheles Thomson. Whether he is of heaven or earth, of the law or of the underworld, he seems to have a remarkably good idea of how to take care of himself and his minions."

"Considering that he has three perfectly good consciences to look after besides his own," Rose agreed, "I must say that he does very well."

"His interests appear to be somewhat cosmopolitan," Leonard observed, leaning back in his chair and gazing around him.

"So much the better," Rose declared. "It means plenty of change for us, and I like

change, only this time I hope my affections are not going to be trifled with."

"You shouldn't wear your heart on your sleeve for sentimental Russians to nibble at," I ventured.

She made a little grimace. I fancy I should have been the recipient of a scathing remark but for the approach of Monsieur Huber, the proprietor of the café. He bowed with great politeness to Rose and handed me a typewritten envelope of familiar appearance. I tore it open and glanced at its brief contents:

> I beg that you will respond to any advances made to you by any regular patrons of the Café des Quatres Etoiles.

I held the note out so that the two others could read it. Then I thrust it into my pocket.

"Mademoiselle sang charmingly to-night," Monsieur Huber declared, rolling his eyes.

"I didn't see you amongst the audience, Monsieur Huber," she replied demurely.

"When you sing I am never far away, Mademoiselle," was the impressive response. "I was standing at the back of the Baroness Spens' box."

Rose glanced upwards at the box which he indicated. A large woman was seated there, dressed in an elaborate evening gown, with jewels sparkling from her bosom and hair. She was dark, with a strong masculine face, a woman who had once, beyond a doubt, been handsome, but whose countenance was now almost forbidding. I recognised her as one of the regular patrons of the café.

"The Baroness," Monsieur Huber continued, "is one of my best clients. She is very good to all my artistes. Sometimes she has them at her home. She pays, too — pays very well. But excuse me — she calls."

The Baroness, with a short, rather thick-set Belgian girl, and a fat, elderly man, who had almost fallen on to the stage applauding the little French soubrette, occupied the stage box, which was on a level with the promenade. Monsieur Huber hurried over towards it, exchanged a few words with his patroness and returned to us.

"The Baroness desires that you three will visit her box and take a glass of wine," he announced, with the air of one conveying a

royal command. " François, a bottle of *34* to the stage box at once."

Apart from our desire to oblige little Mr. Huber, who was really a most good-natured person, our recently received mandate left us no alternative but to comply. We were ushered, therefore, into the box, where the Baroness received us, rather to my surprise, with the air of a woman of breeding, the girl without any special enthusiasm, and the old man, whose eyes were glued upon the soubrette, with indifference. We were offered chairs and suffered the martyrdom of sweet champagne. The Baroness said polite things about our performance, enquired about our impressions of Brussels, and spoke calmly of her residence in the city during the period of German occupation. Her conversation was easy enough, and gracious, yet I could not get it out of my head that her interest in us did not arise solely from the fact of our being professional entertainers.

" You find it pays," she asked, a little abruptly, " while living in Brussels is so dear,

to perform at this café for Monsieur Huber's salary?"

"Financially," I admitted, "our trip here is not particularly remunerative, but we were all three very anxious to get over here and look around."

"You find it very changed — the city?"

"Only as regards the absence of Germans," I replied. "In the old days one met them everywhere."

"They will return," she observed.

"But surely they will not be welcome guests?" I ventured.

"Not at first," she answered indifferently. "Brussels, however, is too cosmopolitan and too near the frontier to preserve her isolation. The intermarrying alone would prevent any ostracism."

"I hope," I ventured to say, "that they will keep away until our stay here is over."

She glanced at my stiff left arm.

"You lost that in the War?"

"That and better things," I told her — "a brother, two cousins and an uncle."

She nodded gravely yet with little pretence at sympathy.

"You English were wonderful," she said coldly.

The little fat man, who had been leaning over the edge of the box, suddenly turned around, mopping his forehead. He was not a pleasant sight to look upon. There were wine stains upon his shirt front and cigar ash upon his waistcoat. His cheeks were pale and puffy; there were bags underneath his eyes. His grey beard and moustache, though carefully trimmed, were scanty and unprepossessing.

"But she is wonderful, that little one," he declared. "Marvellous!"

He poured out a glass of wine, ignoring us in his ecstasy. The Baroness endeavoured to correct his manners.

"You were unfortunate, dear Henri," she said, "that you arrived too late to hear Mademoiselle Mindel sing and to watch her dance. You would have thought less of your little French girl's performance."

Monsieur Henri recovered himself sufficiently to bow to Rose.

"It will be my pleasure another evening," he said. "Meanwhile, dear Baroness, if you will excuse me. Mademoiselle expects me. We shall meet again."

He made us a comprehensive bow and departed. The phlegmatic young woman, who had been introduced to us as Mademoiselle Trudens, muttered something in Flemish as he left the box. The Baroness shook her head reprovingly.

"Monsieur Henri Destin," she pronounced, "is a person of importance. One must humour his whims."

Leonard glanced at his watch and rose.

"I fear that I must be excused, Baroness," he regretted. "My turn to sing is close at hand."

We also rose. The Baroness eyed us reflectively.

"I am having a few friends out to supper to-night at my chateau," she said. "It will give me great pleasure if you will come after the performance. My car will be at the stage door at half-past eleven, and I shall send you back to your hotel."

Her thoughtful hesitation before extending the invitation had been so apparent that we should never have dreamed of accepting it but for our mandate. As it was, we had no alternative. We professed ourselves delighted, and were permitted to depart.

The automobile which awaited us at the stage door at the conclusion of the performance, and which contained our prospective hostess only, was the swiftest and most luxurious in which we had any of us ever ridden. We passed over several miles of cobbled streets with incredible speed, penetrated some distance into the country, and finally turned in at an avenue which led through a dense wood and terminated in front of a chateau, finely situated and of imposing proportions. Even as we descended, however, a curious fact concerning it occurred both to Leonard and myself. The Baroness, who must have been watching us more closely than I had imagined, surprised me by referring to it.

"You are wondering why half my chateau is illuminated and the remainder is in darkness,

is it not so?" she enquired. "Well, I will tell you. The portion which you see in darkness was the headquarters of the most detested German who ever set foot in this country during the enemy occupation of the city. Since his departure, I have not yet been able to accustom myself to the existence of apartments in which he and his suite lived and breathed."

She spoke with a little undernote of passion, waited for no comment from us, but led the way into the brightly lit hall, where servants relieved us of our wraps and we were at once made conscious of an air of luxury and comfort. The apartment into which we were presently shown was almost stately in its proportions, and as a pleasure room almost unique. At one end was a little raised stage for theatrical performances, occupied now by a small orchestra; and fitted into the wall was an electric organ. There was a considerable space of polished floor for dancing, and at the opposite end of the apartment a large round table laid for supper.

"I fear," the Baroness confided, "that my apartment resembles too much a restaurant.

Still, what can one do? My friends love dancing informally, the men love their supper, and this huge apartment, which was built for a music room, would be wasted if I used it in any other fashion. We have a custom here which always prevails. Supper is served at 12.30. As guests arrive, they seat themselves."

"We shall find no difficulty in accommodating ourselves to your delightful customs," I assured her, as we took the places she indicated. "One must dine at six while our present engagement is on, and it seems a long time ago."

The precise character of that entertainment, the status of the guests who presently arrived, and the significance of the whole affair to us personally puzzled us all for a long time. Several beautiful ladies arrived, of apparently satisfactory social position, not possessed of a universal desire to attach themselves to something responsive amongst the male sex. Madame Sara Clèry, of the French Opera Company, a cousin of our hostess, was kind enough to show a marked interest in me and my presence in Brussels.

"Tell me, Monsieur," she begged, in her very attractive undertone, as we sat in a corner after a waltz, "why are you really in Brussels? You tell me that you perform at the Café des Quatres Etoiles, but that is a joke, is it not?"

"Nothing of the sort, indeed, Madame," I assured her. "I am there on a short engagement with my two friends. I am merely what we call in English a strolling mountebank."

"You had no other reason, then, for coming to Brussels?" she persisted.

"Unless I was subconsciously aware of the joy in store for me in meeting Madame," I answered, "there was no other reason."

"Or in coming to this house?"

I shook my head.

"The Baroness was good enough to ask us all," I explained, "and Monsieur Huber likes his artistes to accept the hospitality of his patrons."

She pouted a little.

"You do not treat me with confidence, Monsieur," she complained, "and I am your well-wisher."

"Madame," I replied, "if you would search

my heart, which, alas! is in your possession, you would realise that I don't understand a word of what you are talking about."

She laughed as though but half convinced. We danced again, drank wine together, and talked a great deal of nonsense. All the time I kept my eye on Rose, who found many partners and seemed to be enjoying the evening exceedingly. As the night wore on, I thought it was almost time for a counterattack.

"Tell me, Madame," I begged, as we sat enjoying a cigarette in a remote corner of the room, "what made you think that I might have other affairs in Brussels?"

She looked at me meditatively. I could see that she had not as yet made up her mind about me.

"There are so many," she said, "who come to Brussels for another purpose."

"But what purpose?"

We were resting in a deep window seat. She drew aside the curtains for a moment. Before us stretched the black, unlit wing of the chateau.

"Just that, monsieur," she whispered.

" Come, we dance again. This is the waltz we both love."

And after that, Madame would dance but she would not talk. So we all went back to our rooms in the Hotel de l'Univers more than a little puzzled.

Things began to shape themselves on the following day, when Monsieur Huber handed me another typewritten communication. My instructions were concise but a trifle embarrassing:

> Cultivate Madame Sara Clèry. She is at home from five to seven. At all hazards be there on Thursday. Leave report of visit with Monsieur Huber, addressed Thomson.

Rose made a little grimace as she read over my shoulder.

" Perhaps," she exclaimed, with her head in the air, " you won't have so much to say about poor Mr. Kinlosti now."

" This isn't of my seeking, is it? " I protested.

" Nor was L'Affaire Kinlosti mine," she retorted. " There was a wonderful little Belgian

Count, with moustaches half an inch long, the other night. I shall let him call upon me."

"I shall leave you in Leonard's charge," I replied stiffly.

"Dear old Len!" she mocked. "He won't have an earthly chance if I take it into my head to be frisky, and I'm sure I shall. It isn't natural for a girl to see no men except two ogres of guardians."

"You be thankful you've got us to look after you," Leonard intervened. "From what I've seen of this city, Sodom and Gomorroh weren't in it for levity."

"I can take care of myself," Rose declared, tossing her head.

"Perhaps," I replied. "In the meantime, when I am away on duty — on duty, mind you — Leonard is going to play watchdog."

She dropped a little curtsey to both of us.

"One would think that I were a masquerading princess," she observed.

"You're our princess," I answered quickly.

The peevishness passed from her face in a moment.

"If only you'd tell me so sometimes!" she murmured.

I was at no time quite able to make up my mind how Sara Clèry really regarded my visits. On the first day, she received my present of roses and my compliments with unmistakable pleasure. On the second day, she was still amiable but a little puzzled. On the third day she received me with greater intimacy than ever before, and I was never so relieved as when the opportune arrival of one of her regular admirers — the tenor with whom she was singing — enabled me to beat a graceful retreat. On the fourth afternoon, the specially indicated Thursday, I found her in a state of agitation. It is my confident belief that on that occasion, but for my *douceur* to her maid, which ensured my prompt entry, I should have been denied admission. She welcomed me with mingled affection — simulated — and suspicion. There was no return of her previous day's attitude.

"You find me distracted," she declared presently. "A terrible tragedy has happened."

I murmured a word or two of sympathy.

She looked at me earnestly, as though anxious to probe my mind, to assure herself of my sincerity.

"If I dared to confide in you!" she murmured.

"Dear Sara," I ventured — we had progressed so far — "what is to prevent it? You know that I am your slave."

She drew a dispatch from the bosom of her gown.

"Listen," she said. "There is a secret in my life which has troubled me many times — more than ever," she murmured, dropping her eyes, "since I have known you."

I did not hesitate to play her game, because in my mind I knew that she was deceiving me.

"Tell me?" I begged. "I am impatient to hear."

"There is one in my family," she continued, "who is a criminal."

"What does that matter," I answered, "so long as it is not you?"

"You feel like that, Maurice?" she exclaimed earnestly.

"Indeed I do," I assured her.

"You are English," she went on. "You fought in the War for Belgium's deliverance. The halo of heroism still rests around your head. You can do what others dared not. Listen. This telegram is from my brother. He has escaped from prison in Antwerp. Never mind the charge. The police search for him everywhere, but he promises that he will reach my flat at ten o'clock to-night."

"In disguise?"

"He comes as the victim of a motor accident, in an ambulance car, his face bandaged. But here — how can I keep him here! The Chief of the Police is amongst my intimates. There are people coming and going all day."

"You have a suggestion?" I ventured.

"Yes," she answered. "I was at the Café des Quatres Etoiles when you did your imitations the other night. You have a wonderful gift of making up. My cousin has undertaken to hide Albert at the chateau, if we can get him there. Good! You must come here, make up my brother, say, to imitate your friend Monsieur Cotton, whom he is not unlike. Then you drive out to the chateau quite openly to one of

my cousin's supper parties. Albert will disappear and all will be well."

"And when is this to be?" I asked.

"To-night," she answered. "You consent?"

She leaned towards me. I hesitated merely out of policy. Her lips almost touched my cheek.

"You have perhaps a price, a reward to ask?" she murmured.

I knew then that I was in love with Rose, if I had ever doubted it. I have always flattered myself that I displayed great presence of mind.

"Sara," I said, giving a very excellent extempore performance of British stupidity and magnanimity combined, "I ask for no reward beforehand. I wait till the task is done."

I was vain enough to think that she was almost disappointed. She brushed my cheek with her lips and murmured in my ear.

"You shall not be the loser, Maurice. At eleven o'clock to-night you will come? I am not singing and you must finish early."

"At eleven o'clock," I promised.

That evening I wrote my report and left it with Monsieur Huber, and at eleven o'clock, with my make-up outfit, I presented myself at Madame Clèry's flat. She herself opened the door and detained me for a moment in the hall.

"All is well, so far," she murmured. "Albert arrived in a motor ambulance, all bandaged up. We are alone in the flat. If he is a little nervous, you will forgive him."

She led me into the sitting room. A man of medium height, thin and with a hard, square face, rose from an easy-chair, and turned a half-enquiring, half-suspicious gaze upon me. I was thankful then for the obscurity of the room, no longer ashamed of my deceit, a willing coadjutor in this scheme, whatever it might be. I knew, too, why my services were so earnestly required. The photographer's art had made the face before me infamous.

"This is Monsieur Lister," Sara said. "He has promised to disguise you, Albert."

"Let him be quick about it, then," was the harsh reply.

I never had a more distasteful task, but in the end I succeeded. I concealed the cruel

mouth and softened the brutal jaw, until at last a very passable imitation of Leonard appeared. Sara was loud in her praises and exuberant in her gratitude. Her pseudo-brother did nothing save make my task more difficult by his irritation and impatience. In the end, when all was finished, I handed him an overcoat of Leonard's which I had brought, and we three started out in a large motor car, which was waiting below, for the chateau. We arrived there a little before the accustomed hour for Madame's reception, and the whole place seemed dark and deserted. A strange manservant let us in and disappeared almost immediately. The Baroness came out of the shadows. She, too, seemed affected by the tragedy of the moment. Her cheeks were unusually pale. Her almost Flemish stolidity had disappeared.

"The passages are unlocked," she whispered. "Let us go quickly. In half an hour there may be people who arrive."

She led the way up the broad staircase. I hesitated, but Sara thrust her arm through mine.

"We trust you," she said. "You must come with us."

Arrived on the first floor, we traversed what seemed to be an interminable corridor until we came at last to a green baize door which, on being swung open, revealed an inner one, which the Baroness unlocked. Immediately I was conscious that we were in the uninhabited part of the chateau. The Baroness, who was in front, came to a stop and we all paused.

"We make a mistake," she said in a low tone. "There is no place here for strangers."

She inclined her head towards me. The man laughed a little brutally.

"Stranger or not," he replied, "do you think I am going to let him go until this little affair is finished?"

"And after then, what about us?" the Baroness demanded. "Safety, with you, is a matter of an hour or so, but we remain."

"Bah!" was the contemptuous reply. "He will not inform against women. Sara will see to that."

I felt that it was time I had a word to say on my own account.

"On the whole," I decided, "I have seen as much as I care to of these proceedings. I will find my way back again and await your return, Baroness."

The man laughed scornfully. No art of mine could conceal the scowl which disfigured his face.

"Too late, Mr. Englishman," he said. "You know too much. Remain where you are."

I looked down the muzzle of a particularly unpleasant-looking revolver, which instinct told me the man at the other end would not hesitate to use. At the same time I heard the sharp click of the door being closed behind me.

"Quite unnecessary," I declared, waving my hand towards the revolver. "If you wish me to stay, I am entirely at your service. In fact, to tell you the truth," I went on, "I am beginning to feel a certain amount of curiosity about this enterprise."

Sara's reputed brother laughed harshly.

"You'll have time to get over that," he said.

Warned by his tone, Sara stepped out of the shadows of the room.

"He is not to be hurt!" she exclaimed. "That was a promise."

There was silence. The room in which we were was unlit save by the little points of fire from the electric torches carried by the Baroness and her companion. There was something sinister in the sound of their soft breathing against the background of deep and solemn stillness. Suddenly a tongue of light flashed from Sara's own torch. I saw then that the others were too much engrossed to be even considering my fate. With a tape measure in his hand, the man was tapping certain places upon the wall. Presently he made a mark with a pencil and turned around. His face was livid with excitement.

"Nothing seems to have been touched here," he muttered.

"Nothing has been touched," the Baroness assented calmly. "Other rooms, as you know, have been ransacked, the grounds have been dug up, and the tower almost pulled to pieces. But here, where you sat in state and pulled

the legs out of the spiders' bodies and the souls out of your poor human victims, well, no one has thought of looking here."

The man chuckled, but there was a certain malevolent uneasiness in his expression as he stared at the speaker.

"My victims were not all unwilling, eh?" he demanded.

The Baroness had been feeling along the wall. She touched a switch, and a dull glow of light shone through a dust-encrusted globe set in the ceiling.

"There is still a connection," she said. "It is better so? You need have no fear. The shutters are tightly closed. No one will know that human beings have dared to penetrate into the spider's parlour."

I had my first comprehensive view of the room — a bare, official-looking apartment, with a huge writing table near the window, a heap of empty champagne bottles and cigar boxes in one corner. There was dust everywhere. It seemed, indeed, as though the room might not have been opened for many months.

"You need have no fear," the Baroness re-

peated. "The shutters are fast closed. You can look around on the scene of your former triumphs. The telephone wires have been cut. Nothing else has been altered."

They stood facing one another, the man and the woman. From my point of vantage in the background, I was conscious of a subtle change in the Baroness. The cold stolidity, almost woodenness of her deportment, had gone. Her lips were parted a little, and there was something menacing in the gleam of her white teeth. Her eyes held expression, expression which I could not analyse. She seemed to bristle with sensation. The man who faced her had become uneasy.

"We talk too much," he muttered. "It is enough for me that you have obeyed my orders and left all here untouched."

"It is true," she acknowledged. "Searchers have almost wrecked this wing of the chateau and destroyed my grounds, in search of your spoil, but this bare little room — no! It seemed so harmless, so empty, and besides, there were many who shuddered to come near it."

He busied himself once more with the wall. Suddenly he took a knife from his pocket and cut down a great strip of the wall paper. A little cry of triumph broke from his lips. His fingers seemed to feel a crack. He pushed and tugged till the sweat ran down his face. Finally, with a rumble, a sliding door opened to the extent of about a foot. He paused to gain breath and turned back to the Baroness with a leer of triumph.

"Your treasure hunters were but simpletons," he scoffed. "They saw as far as the end of their noses."

He seemed to become suddenly conscious that no one was looking at him. We were all staring at that gradually widening aperture in the wall, staring at the menacing figure which had unexpectedly appeared there. The man on whose behalf we had embarked upon this expedition swung abruptly around. His lips opened but no sound came. He stood shaking and choking. Mr. Thomson, wiping the dust from his clothes, stepped into the room.

"Excellently timed," he said, nodding pleasantly at me. "Count ——"

The trapped man's recovery was amazing. I doubt whether Mr. Thomson, quick though he was, would have escaped the bullet from that suddenly upraised revolver, but for the Baroness. I have never before nor since looked upon anything so marvellous as her swift action. She struck his arm such a blow that we heard the cracking of the bone, caught him by the shoulders as though he had been a boy, flung him on to the floor, and was there with her hand upon his throat, and all the devils ever born of a woman's hatred glaring out of her face as she leaned over him. It took the three of us to drag her away while there was still a spark of life in the man. When at last we succeeded, he was unconscious, and the marks of her fingers were there, as though photographed on his throat. Mr. Thomson raised a whistle to his lips and blew it.

"I think, perhaps," he remarked, "the police will be kinder."

The little supper party which we had grown accustomed to expect after each period of utility to our chief took place on the following

night under somewhat unusual circumstances —in the saloon of the steamship *Zeebrugge,* one of the new Dover and Ostend fleet. We were pitching pretty heavily and facing a northwest gale, but it happened that we were all pretty good sailors, and though the high seas came thundering against the closed port-holes, and the electric lights swung above our heads, we were quite able to do justice to a very excellent repast. There were so few passengers that the chief steward winked at our smoking in a corner of the saloon, and over our last glass of wine our host threw a little cautious light upon the meaning of our latest adventure.

" The particularly unpleasant gentleman," he observed, " upon whom you inflicted a likeness—a very excellent likeness—to Mr. Leonard Cotton, was, as you have doubtless surmised, at one time known as the Count von Hantzauel, whose notorious deeds in Brussels during the German occupation are infamous throughout the world."

" I wouldn't have insulted Leonard to such an extent if I'd had the least idea beforehand

who he was going to turn out to be," I declared.

"I shall hate my own face more than ever," Leonard groaned.

Mr. Thomson smiled amiably.

"Von Hantzauel certainly seemed to have the gift," he observed, "of making his name hated even amongst those who were personally strangers to him. The Baroness Spens, as you may have surmised, was one of those who, unfortunately for her, had been forced into a certain degree of association with him. He made his headquarters in her house and sowed the seeds of a hatred of which last night he reaped the harvest. Forgive my somewhat confused metaphor. You follow me, I dare say."

"Why was he such an idiot as to come back?" Rose enquired.

"Because," Mr. Thomson explained, "it was the Baroness' wish. The Baroness Spens is a very clever and unforgiving woman, and she has been several years laying her plans for getting von Hantzauel back into Brussels."

"But the inducement?" Rose persisted.

"Von Hantzauel," Thomson explained, "followed in the footsteps of his illustrious chief. He was a collector of such trifles as jewellery, money, and all manner of *objets d'arts* of a small and portable character. With the aid of a German smith whom he sent for when in residence at Brussels, he constructed a very ingenious hiding place in the chateau for his loot. When the reversal of fortunes came, he was one of those pig-headed, obstinate asses who refused to believe in what was coming, and he only escaped from Brussels by a miracle. Since then he has used every argument to persuade the Baroness to bring his little collection over the frontier to Holland. The Baroness played with him as a cat might with a mouse. She declared that his hiding place was so ingenious that even with the plan he had sent her she had failed to discover it. Then she reminded him of the past and declared that the treasure should not leave her house without a visit from him. Finally, as you know, she succeeded. The visit was arranged for. The whole affair called for a certain amount of diplomacy. The direct inter-

vention of the Belgian police would have meant the arrest of von Hantzauel on the frontier. The affair had to be managed differently. The Baroness is an old friend of mine and she sought my aid."

"In what capacity?" I asked quickly. "And what has become of the treasure?"

Mr. Thomson smiled vaguely. He listened for a moment to the bump of the sea against the portholes. Then he filled our glasses.

"An answer to those questions just now is scarcely possible," he replied. "We will call them, if you please, Conundrum Number Three."

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER FOUR

### THE COURTSHIP OF NAIDA

Rose, Leonard and I first saw Naida Modeschka dance from the wings of the great London music hall where she was the star performer, and where we, very much to our surprise, had been offered a brief engagement. I think that from our point of vantage she was even more wonderful than from the vast and densely packed auditorium. None of us had ever before seen movement like it. The wooden boards her feet touched seemed at the moment of contact to become a sea of quicksilver. She had her own arrangement of lights, and she floated in and out of them, her pale face and limbs glittering at one moment like polished marble, the next only a shadow, a skulking, floating shadow, with a pair of great black eyes shining from a terrified face. She never told us or any one else whence came the

music to which she danced, notes as full of Arcadian and mysterious poetry as Grieg, and sometimes breathing the riotous passion of Dvorák. She seemed to delight in unexpected interludes, in sudden changes, and there was something even a little cynical in the outburst of savage passion with which her dance concluded. There was not the slightest doubt, however, as to her complete success. The audience at this particular music hall, the Parthenon, is seldom jaded — they are drawn from too wholesome a class of people — but they are as quick to appreciate a new thing as any audience in the world. There were qualities in Naida's dancing which even the Russian Ballet had failed to disclose — pride of the body, cynical contempt of passion for its own sake, and underneath, the soft, alluring call to Love. She stood by us, panting, after her fifth recall. The faintest of perfumes, something between green tea and Russian violets, seemed to be exuded of her breathlessness from the trembling, exquisitely shaped body, concealed, for the sake of ancient prejudices, under a flowing veil of black net, more subtly

appealing to modern perceptions than even the naked Eve reaching up to the branches of the apple tree. We were a little spellbound, but her eyes caught mine and I spoke.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "you dance as no other on earth."

"Why not include heaven, monsieur," she answered quickly, "for I fear there will be no dancing like mine there."

She made her final bow and came back to where a gaunt and stolid maid pushed past us and wrapped her in a long black satin coat, trimmed and lined with black sable fur. The maid would have hurried her off but she lingered.

"It is your turn, Monsieur?" she asked me. "You three who appear now?"

I assented. The piano was already being drawn into position. Rose stood a few yards away, looking at her hair in a glass. She had already thrown aside her coat. In the auditorium I fancied that I could still hear that faint emotional quiver lingering like the echo of feeling.

"It is our turn," I replied, "but how an

audience could be expected to listen to our banalities after the atmosphere you have created, I can't imagine!"

She made no acknowledgment of my compliment. She was looking at me as though engrossed in her own thoughts, so that in those few seconds I found myself studying her. No breathing person could have called her beautiful, even good-looking. She was dark, with dark hair, eyes and eyebrows. Her cheek bones were almost prominent, her chin narrow, her mouth large but so sensitive that it seemed never at rest. There was not an atom of make-up on her face, and her pallor in the light in which she stood was almost ghastly. Her arms and hands were as lovely as the rest of her body. I could have imagined her, severely dressed, in the classical shades of a great library, one of the leaders of women's thought.

"I shall stay here for your performance," she announced. "Please do your best. Sanda, fetch me a chair."

At the risk of seeming egotistical, I am here going to announce that we three had very

much improved in our work during these days of our prosperity. Rose's perfectly chosen gowns, her renewed health of body and mind, seemed to have given to her voice a richer and sweeter note, and to her feet all the fascinating lightness of modern dancing. Leonard's sense of humour had broadened, and his capacity for finding new stories amounted positively to genius. I myself, in better health, certainly found myself a more adequate partner for Rose, both in singing and dancing. Whatever influence our patron had had to use in the earlier days to secure us engagements was unneeded now. We were at the Parthenon according to instructions, but the engagement had been given to us on our own application and without any outside intervention. Perhaps because our unambitious performance soothed the jangled nerves of our audience, we were extraordinarily well received that night. When it was all over, I found Naida still waiting in her chair. She rose at once and took my arm.

"You will escort me to my dressing room," she said.

"With the greatest pleasure," I assented.

"You see," she went on, "I am making the way easy for you. You are a myrmidon of the great Mr. Thomson, are you not?"

I was startled.

"I know a Mr. Thomson," I admitted, "but it is some time since I have heard from him."

Her eyes mocked me.

"The cleverest of all conspirators," she said, as she came to a standstill outside her dressing room and waved her hand to Rose and Leonard, "are those who do not fear to tell the truth. Lies lead far on the road to failure, but we each have our own methods."

"Believe me," I assured her earnestly, "I have never heard of you in my life except from the newspapers."

"And you have never seen me before?"

"Never!"

She looked at me steadfastly. Her dark, heavily lidded eyes seemed a little contracted; her lips smiled as though they had a joke to themselves. She was a strange-looking creature.

"Well," she conceded, "granted that this is our first meeting — what of it, Monsieur?"

"I pray that it may not be our last," I answered, with ready sincerity.

Her fingers strayed to the knob of the door.

"You will receive your belated instructions before very long," she said. "Then I shall make it easy for you. You may visit me when you like. I live at 96, Milan Court. And so, Monsieur!"

She held her fingers to my lips. I am bound to admit that I hurried back to Leonard, a little shaken.

"A conquest, my son," he observed, looking up from a bowl of cold water and rubbing his head vigorously. "Rose is furious with you. She has asked me to take her out to supper."

"Capital!" I replied spitefully. "I will join you."

Our conversation that evening finally turned upon a subject which we had once or twice lately skirted somewhat apprehensively. We supped at an inconspicuous but desirable table in the Milan Grill Room, and in a style which

would have seemed to us, only a few months ago, wildly extravagant. There was no jazz band to affront our ears and disturb our digestion. We were in touch with the more epicurean type of deliberate pleasure-seekers, the more select crowd who had studied or imbibed the philosophy of pleasure. Everywhere was an air of warmth and luxury. The men and women, mostly in couples, by whom we were surrounded, were chiefly those who had eschewed the hysterical quest of promiscuous pleasure for the more settled but not less fascinating ways of Bohemian domesticity. An actor-manager, close at hand, was giving a digest of a play he had read that afternoon to his leading lady — also his inseparable companion. A celebrated producer and well-known actor was enjoying a brief period of rest with the only woman in his life who had learnt to soothe as well as to fascinate. A widely known and hard-worked barrister, the tragedy of whose domestic life was known to all his friends, was revelling in one hour of peace during the day in the company of a sympathetic and very human little lady from an

adjoining theatre. The atmosphere to us, who had only lately found our way into the paths of prosperity, was almost intoxicating.

It was Leonard who started things by raising his glass to our benefactor. We drank the toast gratefully enough. Then Rose for the first time put into words what was so often in the minds of all of us.

"Maurice," she asked me, "how long does our bargain with Mr. Thomson actually last?"

"There was no time limit," I answered.

"Not, perhaps, in words," she persisted, "but how long in your mind do you consider we are morally bound?"

"Metaphysical history would suggest the period of our lifetime," I replied. "There is no precedent for a soul, once disposed of, being returned to its owner."

She sighed.

"It seems a pity. We really haven't anything more to gain. One would like to settle down and enjoy now with a clear conscience. Why, one of you could marry me."

"We hadn't thought of that," Leonard said drily.

"The fact of it is," I groaned, "we are both in love with you." She leaned back in her chair and looked at us for a moment. I think she realised that I had spoken the truth.

"Then all I can say," she murmured, "is that you are better actors than I thought you were — and greater dears."

"We are wandering from the subject," I said firmly. "I propose that we apply to Mr. Mephistopheles Thomson for a time limit. I should think ——"

That is just as far as I got in my daring proposal. I sat with my mouth unbecomingly open and a fatuous look of astonishment upon my face. My two companions also were stricken dumb. Arrived apparently from nowhere, neat, inconspicuous and unobtrusive, Mr. Thomson paused before our table and greeted us with pleasing cordiality.

"Congratulations to all of you," he said, as he drew up a chair and seated himself. "I was at the Parthenon to-night. If Naida Modeschka's performance was the most wonderful, yours was certainly the most pleasing item upon the programme."

"We have improved, I think," Rose admitted modestly. "Nice frocks do make so much difference."

"And good food," Leonard murmured.

"And no anxieties," I ventured.

"Apropos of which," the newcomer enquired, "how goes our bargain? Do you want your souls back again?"

"If you've quite finished with them," Rose confessed. "We should hate to seem ungrateful, but so far as we are concerned all our ambitions are satisfied."

"We are earning twice as much as we spend," Leonard pointed out.

"And we could book up for two years," I put in.

Mr. Thomson, who upon his arrival had made mystic signs to a waiter, watched the champagne being poured into our glasses. We were not overcareful in the matter of our expenditure, but champagne was the one luxury we denied ourselves except on special occasions.

"You disappoint me," our patron confessed.

Rose leaned forward across the table. She spoke quickly, almost tumultuously.

"Don't think us ungrateful," she begged. "We are not. We often think of that wretched night at Cromer when you became our good angel. Many and many a time since we have blessed your name."

Mr. Thomson bowed.

"Ours was a bargain," he said, "and you have fulfilled your share of it. My disappointment springs from another cause. I have pictured you in my mind as children of the land of Adventure."

"We have lifted the curtain," I ventured to remind him.

"You have done more," he admitted. "You have all three shown capacity and courage. Why withdraw? Believe me, the end and aim of life is not prosperity. The moment the love of adventure ceases, the slumber of middle age commences. There isn't anything more fatal to genius or to the fuller life than a contented conscience, a swelling bank account, and an amble along the easy ways. I give you back what you are pleased to call your souls, if you

will. In five years' time, the three of you will be prematurely middle-aged, the limits of your ambitions will be fixed, one day will be as another. With the passing of all mystery from your lives, will come the adipose somnolence which breeds mental and moral indigestion."

I think that we were all hypnotised. The calmness of his speech, his precise and unemotional handling of words, seemed to lend to them an even greater significance. Before we had realised what was happening, Mr. Thomson was on his feet again.

"We will make that time limit one year, dating from the night at Cromer," he pronounced.

"Yes!" we all three assented.

"To-morrow afternoon at four o'clock," he added, turning to me, "you will call upon Naida Modeschka, the dancer who is now performing at the Parthenon."

"I have already made her acquaintance," I told him. "She spoke to me this evening. She referred to you."

Mr. Thomson smiled benevolently.

"Naida is wonderful," he said. "Never-

theless, you will call. Ask her what has become of Felix Worth. Afterwards, place yourself in her hands. She will explain exactly what is required of you."

As unobtrusively as he had come, he departed. He attracted no attention, and looked neither to the right nor to the left. As he vanished through the revolving door, we all looked at one another.

"Mr. Mephistopheles Thomson," Rose murmured.

"With an accent on the Christian name," Leonard remarked.

Naida received me very graciously on the following afternoon. I was a little surprised that she had made no attempt whatever to alter her surroundings or in any way to create an atmosphere. The ordinary hotel furniture and hangings were lightened only by a profusion of flowers, mostly deep red roses. In place of the flowing robes one might have expected, the great dancer wore a severe tailor-made costume of grey tweed. Her hair was brushed plainly back from her forehead and

tied with ribbon behind. There was no other caller present when I arrived.

" It would be charming of you to come so soon," she murmured, as she held out her hand, " if it were your own will which brought you."

" My own will would have brought me here in any case," I assured her, " but as it happens I have another mission. I am to ask you what has become of Felix Worth."

I looked into the eyes of another woman for a moment, and I was afraid. Her momentary fit of fury, however, passed. She motioned me to a chair.

" How much do you know of this matter? " she asked.

" Nothing at all," I answered promptly.

" That is the way with him," she ruminated. " His agents never know anything."

" That does not, I trust, prevent my finding great pleasure in making your acquaintance, Mademoiselle," I ventured.

She looked at me curiously. Sixty seconds ago I should have described her as being, off the stage, disappointedly plain. I realised my mistake.

"It does not prevent your paying me any compliments you choose," she replied. "There is no reason why we should not be friends — even comrades. The only cloud between us appears to be that it will fall to your lot to kill the only man I have ever really cared for."

I started in my chair.

"I can assure you," I told her, "I am not out for that sort of thing at all."

"But it will come," she persisted.

"It will not," I contradicted her firmly. "I have done all the killing I want to, in fair fighting. I have a weakness for adventures, but nothing would induce me to become an assassin."

She looked at me contemplatively, leaning across from her chair with her chin balanced upon her hands. Then she got up and brought me a queer round wooden box of fragrant Russian cigarettes. She herself lit one, and I followed her example.

"Are you afraid, dear earnest Englishman," she asked, "that I should hate you? Let me tell you the truth. For this man I have no love any more. And he must die."

" He may live or he may die," I answered, " but I am no man's executioner."

" We shall see," she remarked indifferently. " You are a just man, beyond a doubt, but I like you. You are different from all others."

" In what respect? " I enquired.

" I admit you here," she replied, " to the intimacy of a private visit, yet you have not yet suggested that you should become my lover. It intrigues me, this diffidence."

I felt a sudden desire to get out of the room. She laughed at me, laughed with simple, unaffected mirth, laughed till she came over and laid her hands upon my shoulders.

" Go away, dear man," she begged, " before I make myself foolish about you. You shall sit at my side to-night, and perhaps then, when you see what others think of me, you may whisper different things."

" And where do I sit by your side to-night? " I asked.

" You and your two friends," she said, " sup with me in the restaurant downstairs at midnight. Convey my compliments and this invitation to your charming lady companion. I

shall see her at the theatre and will confirm it."

She gave me her fingers and held them for a moment against my lips. Then I went out, a little dazed.

I began to fear that Naida was going to make trouble for me. At the theatre that evening she demanded my constant attendance. Twice she sent notes to my dressing room, and in the midst of the tumultuous applause which followed her wonderful dancing, when she stood in the wings with us after her seventh recall, she tore one of the red roses which had been thrown on to the stage from its cluster, and thrust it in my buttonhole.

"So!" she whispered. "They will know from whom that rose comes. Your fingers will caress it when you sing. They will applaud you the more for my sake."

This was all very pretty and soothing to my vanity, and, I frankly admit, in its way pleasant, but I had all the time the feeling that it was likely to bring trouble upon me. When, in her most charming manner, Naida had issued her invitation to Rose, her enthusi-

astic acceptance was entirely marred for me by the manner of it.

"A supper party will be perfectly delightful," Rose declared, smiling with dangerous sweetness. "I have a little headache to-night but that will pass. In any case you will not mind if Leonard — if Mr. Cotton should bring me away early."

"So long as you do not rob me of my dear cavalier," Naida replied, to my dismay, squeezing my arm.

I marched Leonard on one side, taking advantage of the insistent roars of recall which drew Naida back on to the stage.

"Look here, Len," I said, "I don't know what this game is, but I'm playing it for the three of us. I am obeying orders so far as Mademoiselle Naida is concerned. If Rose won't see it, I shall rely upon you."

"I'll do my best, old chap," he promised, with a gloom which I fancied was not altogether natural. "It's a jolly hard situation, though. Rose had asked me to take her out to supper to-night, and to dinner on Sunday night."

"You can count that dinner off," I said firmly. "We three have dined together every Sunday night since we started out. Sometimes it's been a scrag of mutton and a glass of beer; once or twice — that week at Cromer, Len — not even that. On Sunday night it's going to be caviare and a Maryland chicken, and I'm in it."

"That's all right," Leonard assured me. "Of course, Rose thought that you'd be in attendance on Naida."

"You and I won't have any misunderstanding, at any rate, Len," I insisted. "Naida means just as much to me as that bit of fluff on your coat. When our year is up, I shall ask Rose to marry me, and though you're the dearest fellow in the world, I hope she'll have me and not you."

"I sha'n't take advantage, old chap," Leonard promised, with a sigh, "but it's getting filthily difficult. She pretended she wanted me to kiss her last night."

"I'll punch your head if you do," I answered savagely. "Our call."

The supper party did not improve matters.

We found quite a distinguished little gathering in the foyer of the Milan, including the managing director of the Parthenon, some of the best known dramatic critics, a famous actor and his wife, another and a lady who might have been, a foreign ambassador, and two other well-known and distinguished men about town. Naida did her duty by placing a very distinguished nobleman with cosmopolitan tastes upon her right, but, to my secret dismay and the wonder of the rest of the company, she insisted upon my occupying the seat on the other side of her.

"Now," she whispered, looking at me from under her eyelashes with that slow, curious smile upon her lips, "I have made the little lady jealous, is it not so? And also the great managing director who pays me my salary, and perhaps others. But what does it matter? You are content?"

The lie came uneasily from my lips. Naida, however, seemed satisfied. It was borne in upon me now that it was her deliberate purpose, part of the game, in fact, not only to exploit me as a victim of her charms but to

practically advertise her simulated infatuation. I watched Rose flirting desperately with a very attractive man who was seated upon her left, and for a moment I felt that the situation was impossible — that I should do best to mutter a few plain words to my hostess and deliberately dissociate myself from the rôle into which I had drifted. Then I remembered our chief's confidence — Naida spoke to me with unexpected kindness. I caught the echo of Rose's unnecessarily joyous laughter, and I changed my mind. Thenceforth I played my part. I lent myself to the gaiety of the moment. We were all young together. The wine was good, life was good, the very music seemed playing us down the avenues of pleasure. From a gay party we became almost an uproarious one. We moved outside into the lounge for our coffee, Naida never letting me for an instant leave her side, relegating to me the duties of host, thrusting her pocketbook into my hand, insisting that I should order the cigars and liqueurs, fee the waiters, and even sign the bill on her behalf. There were many smiles amongst the little company,

shrugs of the shoulders, and whispered enquiries as to my identity. My fictitious position seemed to make me an object of envy, but I never altogether lost my head. I waited for my opportunity, and when it came I rose quickly to my feet and walked over to Rose's side. Her companion of the moment had been summoned away to speak to some acquaintances in another part of the lounge.

"Rose," I began sternly ——

She looked at me with a bright but artificial smile. I leaned down and continued under my breath.

"I play the buffoon to order," I reminded her. "You, too, have your part in this."

"Indeed?" she murmured.

"Yes! Your part is not to make mine more difficult. Your part is to remember ——"

Then I stopped short. It was a difficult position. There was my contract with Leonard to be borne in mind.

"To remember what?" she asked, looking at me more naturally.

"The things of which your heart assures you," I answered. "I am only human. If I

fail to-night, the fault will not be wholly mine."

After that there was a change in Rose's demeanour, and once, when our eyes met, she smiled. Naida, however, still played her part of sorceress. She seemed impatient of every word she was forced to speak to others. She whispered often in my ear. Even her fingers sought mine. It was just at this stage that for the first time I noticed the somewhat singular appearance of a man who was watching us from the few seats upstairs reserved for guests of the hotel who were not in evening dress. As though he sought concealment, he had found a chair in the most remote corner and was half hidden by a slight projection of the wall. He had a mass of black hair, a heavy, sallow face, from which one formed the idea that he had recently removed a beard, and dark staring eyes. He was untidily dressed for his surroundings, amongst which he seemed curiously out of place. An impulse prompted me to point him out to Naida. She glanced in the direction I indicated but merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Dear friend," she whispered, "you forget that I am a famous person, more so abroad than in your little island. There are many who watch me with thoughts in their heart which they will never dare to utter. There are many who would give a share of their possessions to be seated where you are seated, to be treated as I am treating you."

"The man is a foreigner, without a doubt," I remarked.

"And foreigners," she answered, with a stabbing little glance, "are quicker to feel and understand than Englishmen."

We kept the party going until long past closing time, and then an adjournment of our diminished numbers was made to Naida's suite. Here she distributed signed photographs to her remaining guests, accompanied by a wave of the hand which meant dismissal. Rose and Leonard were amongst the first to leave, Rose with a look in her eyes which might have meant anything. I stepped quickly forward. Naida looked at me warningly. Now that we had left the lounge, it seemed to me that her demeanour had to some extent changed.

" For your impatience, Monsieur Maurice," she said, " you will be the last. Offer the cigarettes, if you please. And your friend Mr. Cotton, will he not take a whisky and soda before he goes? "

One by one they drifted away. Rose and Leonard were driven home by one of the former's new admirers. The time came when we were alone. Naida listened to the closing of the door and to the clanging of the lift gate. Then with her back to the table against which she was leaning, she looked across at me with an odd little smile upon her lips.

" So we are alone, my friend."

" It has that appearance," I admitted, taking one of her cigarettes and lighting it. " I await your further instructions."

She nodded her head slowly. She seemed to be considering my attitude.

" My further instructions," she mimicked. " Oh, Monsieur Maurice, what a strange person! Ring the bell on your left, please."

I obeyed. A maid presented herself at once from the inner room. Naida spoke to her for a moment in some weird language. Then she

turned towards me, yawned and stretched herself.

"Prepare for a shock," she said. "For ten minutes I leave you. You seat yourself in that easy chair, you take a whisky and soda and the evening paper, you make yourself at home. You understand?"

"Perfectly," I answered, not at all sorry for a few minutes' solitude.

"Then au revoir! But have no fear," she added, looking back with a mocking smile, "I shall return."

A quarter of an hour or so passed. I heard Naida telephoning from her bedroom and heard her voice in conversation with her maid. Then she reappeared. She was wearing a yellow creation tied around her with a girdle, Chinese sandals tied with broad yellow ribbon; and her unloosed hair was gathered together with ribbon of the same colour. She displayed herself for my admiration.

"You admire, Monsieur Maurice? You like the colour?"

"You look charming," I replied. "And now?"

She held up her finger.

"You are not to stir," she directed, waving her finger at me.

She moved towards the door which led into the corridor, opened it softly and peered outside. Then, as though not satisfied, she disappeared altogether. When she returned, she closed the door with a little slam and threw herself into a chair opposite to me.

"And now?" I repeated patiently.

"It is the hardest part of your task, this, Monsieur Maurice," she said, with a demure little droop of the eyes. "You see the time? It is exactly two o'clock. For one hour you remain where you are. At the end of that hour you are free. You may then leave, and, if you wish it so, your courtship of Naida is over."

"And for that hour?" I asked, a little unsteadily.

She came and sat on the arm of my chair. Her face was upturned to mine.

"Shall I keep you company?" she whispered.

I leaned down and took the kiss she offered

me. I held her for a moment in my arms. Then I gripped her wrists.

"Naida," I said, and my own voice sounded to me unfamiliar, "of course I know this is a game, but I don't understand the rules."

"We make them," she murmured.

"I am in love with Rose Mindel," I continued. "I should be married to her at the present moment but for a stupid agreement between Leonard Cotton and myself, made when we three started out together. I am in love with her, but I'm no Joseph. You know what you are, and your power. I'm not any different from other men."

"But you do not care, then?" she asked quickly.

"There isn't any ordinary young man of my type," I answered, "who has drunk your wine and sat by your side all the evening, and received your kindness, and finds himself here alone with you, who wouldn't care — in a way — the wrong way. I care like that, if it's any good. And now you understand."

She slipped from her place, kissed me on both eyes, and ran across to the door of the

inner room. She looked back at me only for a moment, opened her lips, said nothing, and disappeared, closing the door softly behind her. I mixed myself the stiffest whisky and soda I had ever concocted in my life, lit a cigar from a box I found on the sideboard, and sat down to watch the clock.

At five minutes to three, I was walking up and down the room with my overcoat on. At a minute to the hour, as I stood with my eyes glued to the clock, the inner door softly opened. Naida stood framed upon the threshold. There was a look of distress upon her face.

"Monsieur Maurice," she said, "I had made up my mind to say nothing, but that was wrong. You are a very honourable young man and I have not met many. It has been promised to me that no harm shall come to you, but yet — go warily to the lift."

She disappeared and closed the door. For the first time she locked it. Somehow, I felt, as I stepped out into the corridor, that the dangers which might be waiting for me were small things. I stood for several seconds,

looking up and down. To reach the lift I had to traverse the whole of the corridor, turn to the left and pass along another shorter one. I stepped out carelessly enough, and then — the scantily lit passage seemed suddenly filled with whispering voices, with eyes peering at me from mysterious corners; the soft carpets behind me were reverberant with muffled and stealthy footsteps. I was acutely conscious of the presence of danger. As I neared the corner of the corridor every nerve of my body was bristling with apprehension. Before I turned, I paused for a moment and looked behind. There was only a single electric lamp burning, but I could see dimly along the empty space to the end. There was no sign of any moving figure, nor any sound. Then I turned the corner to find myself suddenly seized in a pair of giant arms, the dull flicker of upraised steel before my eyes, the sallow, brutelike face, the black, flaming eyes of the man who had watched me from the lounge, within an inch or two of me.

I had no chance to call out. My assailant's left hand was upon my throat. I could see

him gathering strength to drive that knife down into my heart. My brain was perfectly active. I waited with tense muscles for the terrible moment, meaning to fling myself on one side in the hope that I might escape mortal injury from that first blow, at any rate. And then I saw something loom up behind. I saw an arm raised even higher than my captor's, and I heard the wickedest sound in life — the crash of dull metal into a man's skull. The grasp upon my throat was instantly relaxed, doors were thrown open along the corridor, and I sank back into a momentary fit of unconsciousness.

If our customary supper party with Mr. Thomson lacked some of those qualities which in the earlier days of our adventures had made it so wonderful a thing, the change of venue, and our host's curious genius in devising new dishes, still contrived to make the occasion a memorable one. We met this time in a private room at the Hotel Albion at Brighton, whither a telephone message had summoned us earlier in the day. Mr. Thomson, spick and span as

ever, looking in the pink of condition, commended to us the best oysters in the world and sipped almost reverently the contents of a dust-covered bottle of Chablis.

"I am not sure," he told us, with the air of one imparting grave knowledge, "that in these days it is not possible to find better vintages out of London than one comes across even in the restaurants de luxe. This wine, for instance."

"The wine is wonderful," Rose agreed. "These oysters are wonderful, too, and I never saw such a lobster mayonnaise as that upon the sideboard. But, dear Mr. Thomson, if you expect us to enjoy our supper, do be merciful. There will be no waiter in the room for at least five minutes. Give us some idea as to the meaning of this last adventure."

Mr. Thomson smiled benevolently.

"Why not?" he said. "Here is the story in a very few words. There was in London, ten days ago, the most dangerous anarchist and political disturber of the peace in Europe. His name is a household word to all of you. He passed here as Paul Kansky."

"Naida's lover," I ventured.

"As a matter of fact, her husband," Mr. Thomson explained. "His removal was absolutely necessary for the internal peace of this country. There were a hundred charges on which he could have been arrested, but not one for which he could have been safely put out of the way. Being at times open to accept a contract of this nature, I undertook to dispose of him."

I shivered a little as I listened. Mr. Thomson continued very much as though he were referring to some ordinary commercial undertaking.

"Kansky's one weakness was Naida Modeschka, his one passion jealousy. With the aid of our young friend here, I succeeded in fanning that passion into a red-hot flame. I succeeded, too, in engineering such an attempt at wilful murder on the part of Kansky that his own demise, owing to the apparently accidental intervention of a casual rescuer, seemed to occur quite naturally. You behold the result of an exceedingly well-laid scheme. This mischievous person is dead and buried under the name he bore at the Milan Hotel, and

which the great world of his followers does not recognise."

"Then my rescuer," I exclaimed, "John P. Martin, the American Oil Trust man ——"

"Precisely," Mr. Thomson interrupted. "Mr. Martin was my agent, a man of iron and a professional fighter, planted in room number eighty-four, with instructions to intervene on your behalf in such a way that Kansky could give no more trouble."

"And those other two men who gave evidence — the witnesses?"

"Also arranged for," Mr. Thomson acknowledged. "It was really a very well-planned affair. The man Kansky's passion for Naida was proved by the letters produced in court. His attack upon our young friend here provided ample excuse for Mr. Martin's vigorous action. The witnesses, of course, were able to declare that Kansky was in the act of committing a probable murder, and that Martin's contra attack, with its unfortunate results, saved your life."

"And Naida?" Rose enquired.

Mr. Thomson smiled.

"How should we be able to deal with these little affairs," he observed, "but for the vagaries, my dear Miss Mindel, of your wonderful sex? Naida was a very willing accomplice in our little scheme. For seven years in a brutalised Russia she had lived under that man's dominance. When she was fortunate enough to escape over here, it was certainly not with the idea of again submitting to it. I hear the waiter. Any more questions?"

"For whom were you acting?" I asked eagerly. "How did this affair come into your hands?"

Mr. Thomson seemed to be listening to the roar of the sea, which came to us pleasantly through the open window.

"Ah!" he murmured. "That again is a question the answer to which I fear must be postponed. Shall we call it Conundrum Number Four?"

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER FIVE

### THE TRAGEDY AT GREYMARSHES

"SPRING," Leonard declared, fanning himself with his straw hat and breathing in the ozone from the waves which rippled up to within a few yards of our chairs, "is upon us."

"I must get some new frocks," Rose murmured absently.

"To-morrow," I reflected, "I must go through my tennis flannels."

"Jolly good-looking girl that was with the party from the Grange at the show last night," Leonard continued reminiscently. "I liked the way her eyelashes curled. Jolly fine figure, too."

"The tutor man is quite handsome," Rose ruminated. "He ties his black evening bow just the way I like."

"Handsome!" I scoffed. "Why, he's got a cast in his eye! He reminds me, more than

anything, of the plaster villains in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's."

"I didn't notice any cast," Rose sighed, her eyes turned dreamily seawards. "He looked at me hard enough, too, when I was dancing."

"They're a strange crew at the Grange," I observed, lighting a cigarette from the case which Leonard had thrown me. "I can't altogether size them up."

Rose turned towards me reproachfully.

"You are becoming obsessed, Maurice, with your love of adventures," she complained gently. "You think of nothing else. Surely, in this dear, old-world place we can have a little rest; we can drop the tenseness of the last few months and become just simple, natural human beings again."

"The chief didn't send us down here for nothing," I ventured.

"Don't forget," she reminded me, "that at our last supper at Brighton I begged for a little rest. Only a few weeks afterwards, he sent us here. I am quite certain that nothing ever happened at Greymarshes. If we get

into any trouble here, it will simply be because the spring is so disturbing."

She looked at me lazily, almost affectionately. Then she looked at Leonard. His hat was tilted over his eyes and his hands were clasped around his knees. There was very little of his good-natured, pudgy face to be seen.

"I wonder," she continued, with a little sigh, "why neither of you ever make love to me. I'm very attractive."

"The situation," Leonard began, taking his hat off and sitting up ——

"Oh, hang the situation!" Rose interrupted irritably. "If you can't make up your minds which of you it is to be, you might toss up or something. Here's spring coming on. I'm twenty-two years old, and I haven't got a young man. You will drive me to answer some of the desperate notes which are showered upon me by lovesick youths from the front row. I had another last night from Arthur. I believe that he really loves me."

"I'm afraid Arthur will have to be spanked," I said.

Rose made a little grimace.

"There is such a thing, Mr. Maurice Lister," she declared, "as playing the watchdog just a little too zealously — especially in the springtime. See who's coming. I think I shall turn round and smile."

We both looked along the sands in the direction which she had indicated by her parasol. A tall, weedy young man, dressed with the utmost care in a grey flannel suit, brown shoes and linen spats, a Panama hat and a quaintly impossible tie, came slowly towards us, swinging a stick in his hand. As he drew near, he diffused multitudinous odours. His pimply face was suffused with a deep flow of colour. We realised at once what was going to happen. The young man whom we knew by repute only as Mr. Arthur Dompers, established at the Grange with a tutor and a small company of satellites, had evidently made up his mind to speak to us.

He came to a standstill, sidled round to the front of us, and raised his hat.

"Good morning! I say, you'll forgive my

saying so — what? Awfully jolly show of yours! Ripping!"

Now I cannot say that any of us took to this young man, and, considering our Bohemian manner of life, we none of us had a fancy for chance acquaintances. The gentle rebuke which we had meditated, however, died away, first on Rose's lips and then on mine. It became apparent to us that the boy was horribly nervous.

"Glad you like it," I rejoined.

"So nice of you," Rose murmured.

"Quite a crowd from your place last night, wasn't there?" Leonard observed.

"That's right," the young man acquiesced. "We all weighed in — had dinner early on purpose. Jolly place you've got here."

"Won't you sit down?" Rose invited.

The boy squatted promptly at her feet. He wore pink socks and he reeked of scent, yet there was something a little pathetic in his obvious desire to be friendly.

"Are you cramming for anything in particular?" I asked him.

"I was supposed to go in for the Army,"

was the dubious reply, " but the exams are so jolly difficult. I failed for Sandhurst twice. Now they're trying to get me in at Cambridge so that I can join a cadet corps."

" The exams are so much stiffer since the war," Rose remarked consolingly.

" Are any of your people down here with you? " I enquired.

The boy shook his head.

" I haven't any people to speak of," he confided, " except an uncle I have scarcely ever seen. Another uncle — my father's brother — left me all my money. Sometimes," the young man added, with a queer flash of seriousness which made one forget his socks and his tie and his pimples, " I wish he hadn't."

" It must be awfully nice, though, to feel that you've plenty of time in life for games and all that sort of thing," Rose remarked, with a mild attempt at consolation.

" I'm not very good at games," the young man confessed. " Mr. Duncombe and his friends are so much better than I am, and they always laugh at me."

"That is a very untutorlike thing to do," Rose declared indignantly.

The young man looked frightened.

"Mr. Duncombe is very good to me — very kind indeed," he repeated, in parrot-like fashion.

"Is he?" Rose queried drily.

"He has no end of people down so that we shouldn't be dull," the young man went on. "There's his sister — she's very kind to me, too. I think I shall have to marry her."

"Why?" Rose asked in bewilderment.

"I think Mr. Duncombe would like me to," was the resigned reply. "I am very fond of Ella. She sings and dances beautifully."

"How old are you?" Rose enquired.

The boy seemed on the point of making another parrot-like reply. Then he chanced to meet the kindly expression in Rose's face as she leaned towards him. He hesitated.

"There's a sort of secret about my age," he confided. "Mr. Duncombe likes me to tell every one that I am twenty."

"And aren't you?" I asked curiously.

He shook his head.

"I shall be twenty-one on Saturday," he said. "I shall be able to sign cheques of my own then — and make my will."

"What do you want to make your will for?" Rose asked. "You're strong enough, aren't you?"

"It is the duty of every one with a great deal of money to make their will directly they are twenty-one," the boy declared, as though repeating a lesson. "If I had my own way," he added, looking up at Rose, "I should leave a great deal of money to you, but I don't suppose I shall be allowed to."

"Good gracious, Mr. Dompers!" Rose exclaimed. "Why, I scarcely know you!"

"I like your face," the young man continued earnestly. "If you saw the faces of the people who are staying at the Grange, you would know what I mean. They all look as though they wanted something. They remind me sometimes of a pack of hounds. And they pretend not to, but they are always watching me."

We had been so engrossed in the self-disclosures of this half-witted young man that we had not noticed the approach of another prom-

enader along the sands. It was a very different person who now accosted us, hat in hand and a courteous smile upon his lips. There was not a single criticism in which the most fastidious might indulge against Hilary Duncombe's address, his manners or his clothes.

"Good morning! I am glad to see that my young ward has been finding friends."

The young man scrambled at once to his feet and stood, awkward and speechless, a little apart. His tutor, the very prototype of kindly and aristocratic ease, addressed a few kindly remarks to us.

"I am so thankful," he went on, "when Arthur finds courage to speak to any one. He is a good boy, but he finds conversation with strangers as a rule difficult."

"We haven't found him at all shy," Rose assured him, with a smile at the subject of these remarks. "On the contrary, he has been entertaining us quite nicely."

Mr. Duncombe appeared to find Rose's favourable judgment a matter for personal gratification.

"You are very kind," he said. "I am sure

that Arthur has already told you how charmed we were with your performance last night. My guests are agitating for a permanent change in our dinner hour, that we may be more frequent attendants."

"How nice!" Rose murmured. "It does make quite a difference to see some civilised people in the reserved seats."

"My sister," Duncombe continued, "would be delighted to make your acquaintance. We may, perhaps, persuade you to pay us a little visit at the Grange after the performance one evening. Arthur," he went on, "we must get back now. Ella is waiting for a set of tennis."

They moved off together. The impression they left behind was an unpleasant one.

"A second Ardalmont case," Leonard suggested.

"In which case," I reflected gloomily, "the mystery of our presence here is solved."

We were a little depressed as we returned to the hotel — a long, grey-stone building, once a farmhouse and still entirely unpretentious. Our worst prognostications were promptly verified. The maidservant who

waited upon us in the coffee room brought me a note with a typewritten address.

"This was left here by a motor-cyclist soon after you went out, sir," she announced.

I tore open the envelope and we pored over it:

Accept any hospitality proffered from the Grange. Encourage the young man, Arthur Dompers, to talk, watch Duncombe, and report on the situation.

"Dull as ditchwater!" I exclaimed, as I tore up the communication in disgust. "An unprepossessing cub of a boy, whom his tutor permits to be fleeced at billiards and whom he is probably going to marry to his sister. Sordid as it can be. Not a thrill in it for us."

"This may be my show," Rose mused, her blue eyes very wide open and innocent. "I may be able to guide the young man from the matrimonial noose. I wonder if he is really very rich. Perhaps I'll marry him myself. I suppose I could keep him on a chain."

I sipped my *apéritif* gloomily. The taste of true adventures was still upon my palate, and the obviousness of this one repelled.

Our ideas as to the menacing nature of Arthur Dompers' surroundings were to some extent modified by our first visit to the Grange, which took place that night after the performance. Ella Duncombe was a rather slangy, somewhat unpleasant-looking young woman of apparently twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age. She had a bad temper, which she scarcely troubled to conceal, and conducted herself generally towards her brother's charge with more contempt than toleration. She scarcely fulfilled one's idea of an adventuress. Major Lethwaite, a guest in the house whom we had fixed upon as the person accustomed to play Arthur Dompers for a hundred pounds at billiards whenever finances ran low, was to all appearance a perfectly harmless person who played sixpenny points at bridge and thought sixpenny pool excessive. Laura Richardson, a friend of Ella's, was just an ordinary, fairly well-bred, good-looking but rather boisterous young person. Mrs. Scatterwell, whose place apparently was that of chaperon, was a handsome and rather silent woman, whose sole interest

seemed to be centred in Duncombe himself. The ménage was perhaps a curious one, but scarcely suspicious. Our host himself appeared to have no reserves except on the subject of his young charge.

"After the war was a bit of a knock for most of us," he remarked meditatively, as we men sat in the smoking room of the Grange after a very excellent supper. "Here are you, Lister, with a game arm, going round the country entertaining, more or less, I take it, for your living. I tried every job that was offered me and did very little good at any of them. Last of all I took this bear-leading on, and, between you and me, I sometimes wish to God I hadn't!"

"Why?" I asked. "The boy seems amiable enough."

"He seems so," Duncombe assented drily, "but the fact of it is that he is innately clumsy and innately deceitful. There is no sport for which he shows the least aptitude. I've tried them all with the same result. The only thing he can do is swim, and even then it's hard work to get him into the sea unless the sun shines.

He hasn't the slightest taste; I am bound by the trustees' deed to allow him pocket money at the rate of a hundred pounds a month, and half of it he spends in buying most outrageous clothes. You know who he is, I suppose?"

"Not an idea," I replied.

Duncombe's eyebrows were slightly raised. He looked at me keenly.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I took it for granted that you knew the story. He is the Welsh miner's orphan, who inherited two and a quarter million from Jacob Dompers of New York. A nice little windfall for a cub like this, isn't it?"

I remembered reading the story in the newspapers some years ago. So did Leonard.

"What about his relatives?" the latter asked.

"The only one with whom I have had any communication," Duncombe replied, "was a Welsh Baptist Minister who declined to have anything to say to the young man, and who wrote me on half a sheet of brown grocery paper, pointing out by means of many Biblical texts that no person with a banking ac-

count could hope to escape the flames of the bottomless pit."

"Who placed the boy in your charge, then?" I enquired.

"The London agents for the New York solicitors. I answered an advertisement. I think they realise," he went on, "that I have done my best. I have tried to fit him for one or two professions, in vain."

"How long have you had him?" Leonard asked.

Duncombe's long fingers played for a moment with his small black moustache. There was a quick light in his eyes as he glanced towards Leonard.

"Three years this June," he answered.

"Then he was sixteen when he came to you?"

Duncombe assented with a little motion of his head.

"You probably think that he is backward now for nineteen," he said. "You should have seen him when he came to me."

"I suppose he is backward," I admitted,

" and yet, to tell you the truth, I should have thought him older."

" His twentieth birthday is this week," Duncombe told us. " I am getting a thousand a year and my expenses for looking after him, and I haven't any prospects of a job when he is out of my hands, but I wish to heavens it was his twenty-first! — I suppose we ought to see what the others are doing."

We made our way out into the hall, which was the main living room of the Grange. Arthur was playing billiards with Lethwaite, playing sullenly and without interest, and turning around after every stroke to listen to the conversation between Rose and the other two girls, who were seated upon a lounge, watching. Lethwaite, just as we appeared, went out with a stroke which was an obvious fluke. Arthur flung half a crown across the table and put up his cue ill-humoredly.

" Beastly fluke! " he grumbled. " No one can play against such luck."

He strode over with his hands in his pockets to where Rose was seated. Miss Duncombe

watched him approach with a sombre light in her dark eyes.

"Bad-tempered again, Arthur?" she observed.

"He's a rotten fluker," the young man rejoined surlily. "He wins all my pocket money."

For a single moment the whole situation seemed to be commonplace, almost absurd. Here was a sulky, ill-conditioned boy, pitchforked into the charge of a very ordinary little company of gentlepeople, who were doing their best to make him one of themselves. Duncombe's rebuke was free from all severity, and it was certainly merited.

"Arthur," he said, "you should never accuse your opponent of fluking at any game. Take your defeat in silence if you cannot be pleasant about it. Mr. Lister or Mr. Cotton would tell you that I am giving you good advice."

"It was rather hard lines," Rose remarked, smiling up at him.

The change in the boy's face was almost amazing.

"You see, I was ninety-eight," he explained, "and that's the seventh half-crown I've lost following, just on the last stroke — Miss Mindel — I say — would you sing something?"

Rose got up and made her way to the piano, followed by the young man. For a moment I saw precisely the look in Miss Duncombe's dark eyes as had flashed in her brother's a few minutes before, a look, I fancied, of patient but subdued malevolence. Almost as I realised it, however, it passed. She motioned me to sit by her side.

"Mr. Lister," she said, "I envy you your profession. I think that anything in the world must be better than being bear-leader to a boy like Arthur."

"Your brother seems to have quite a great deal of influence over him," I observed.

"As much as any one could have, perhaps," she agreed. "After all, what can one expect? You can't make bricks without straw, and it's hard to give even the appearance of a gentleman to the son of a Welsh miner. Look at him now!"

Arthur was standing by the piano, listening to Rose, who had commenced to sing. He was awkward, self-conscious and ill at ease. He kept on thrusting his hands into his pockets and taking them out again. There was an expression in his eyes which angered me.

" I suppose he's rather a handful," I said.

Duncombe, who had been strolling about the room, joined us just in time to hear the last remark.

" He is that," he admitted, " and yet, after all, I suppose I ought not to grumble. I'm well enough paid for looking after him. A word with you, Lister."

He drew me away to the farther end of the room. We stepped out of the open window on to the broad gravel path. It was a soft, dark night, with jagged masses of black cloud stretched across the sky. Below us was the sandy beach, and away westwards we could hear the waves crashing amongst the rocks of the Greymarshes Bay.

" It's like this, you see, Lister," Duncombe began, speaking a little jerkily and watching me closely. " I've an agreement to look after

this cub for five years — a thousand a year and every mortal expense. I must say the lawyers are generous about expenses. I don't mind admitting that they cover the whole cost of my housekeeping, and I'm able to save practically the lot. I'm going in for fruit farming when the job comes to an end, but the boy's health is uncertain. I can't help wondering what would happen to me if he were to die."

"I suppose," I ventured, "that your job would come to an end."

"I couldn't afford that," Duncombe declared. "I want to secure against it if I can. You're a stranger. You can look at this matter with an open mind. What do you think about insuring his life for, say, five or ten thousand pounds?"

"I wouldn't think of it," I told him bluntly, "while the boy is under your charge."

He seemed disappointed, but he nodded understandingly.

"Strikes you like that, does it?" he sighed. "Well, I was afraid it might. I expect you're right, too. Reminiscent of the Ardalmont mystery, and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"As you say," I assented, a little grimly.

The three of us were inclined to be gloomy during our walk home.

"I don't know why," Rose said, "but I detest that household."

"They're all right in their way," Leonard observed dubiously, "but they seem all of them to hate their job so. If they're paid for looking after that young cub, they ought to stomach their prejudices and do it."

"I don't like him," Rose pronounced abruptly. "I thought he was just simple and foolish at first, but I've come to the conclusion that I don't like him. There isn't a single member of the household I do like. They're just sordid and peevish. I think the chief might have found us something better to do."

"Perhaps he looks upon this in the light of a holiday task," I suggested.

Rose had a flash of inspiration just then. She passed her arm through mine, and notwithstanding the warm wind, she shivered a little.

"There is just one person in that household," she said, "of whom I am terrified."

"Who is it?" Leonard asked.

She shook her head.

"Wait," she begged.

A few days later, we were invited to a picnic party at Greymarshes Bay to celebrate Arthur's supposed twentieth birthday. Duncombe had hired a little petrol launch, and we took our lunch and bathing clothes along the coast. It was a hot, almost breathless day, and we entered the water eagerly for our pre-luncheon bathe. Every one except Mrs. Scatterwell bathed, and she busied herself with one of the servants, preparing luncheon in a shady spot. Somehow or other, perhaps because of the brilliancy of the weather, every one was in better spirits. Even Duncombe and his pupil seemed to be on quite good terms. They vied with one another in diving feats, and Arthur, exulting in his one accomplishment, clambered up the rocks more than once to a considerable height, before he made his plunge. Presently, however, we all tired a little of the sport. Rose was already dressing in a convenient cave. I was lying at full length, enjoying a sun bath on the shingle, when I heard Dun-

combe's voice from behind a great rocky promontory jutting out from the sea a little to my left.

"One more, Arthur. I've found a new place. It's the best of the lot."

I watched the young man climb obediently up the jagged boulder of rock. The topmost ledge must have been at least twenty or thirty feet high, and he was well on his way to it, with his back turned to me, when I became conscious of a queer feeling of apprehension. The space of water into which Arthur was to plunge was out of my sight, but there was a little foam at the corner, and I remembered how once on a stormy day I had stood and seen the broken waves thunder along this opening. I rose to my feet, waded in as far as I could, and swam on my side towards the promontory. Arthur by now had reached the summit and was cautiously scrambling to his feet. There was no sign anywhere of Duncombe. I swam on a few more strokes, until I was suddenly conscious of a current. I swam round it, until I was directly facing Arthur,

now standing upright and commencing to poise.

"Wait a moment, Arthur," I called out.

"Get out of the way, then," he replied. "I'm coming over. Where's Duncombe?"

I looked around but there was no sign of him, yet I knew very well that he could not be more than a few yards away.

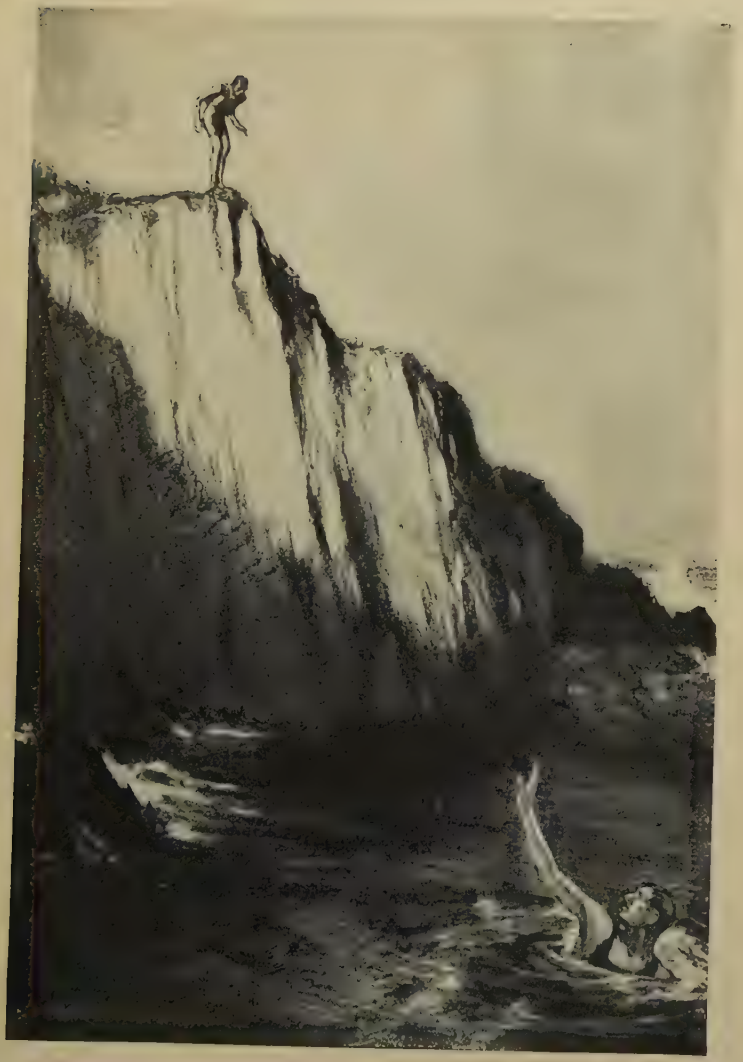
"One moment, Arthur," I shouted back.

He dropped his arms and stood there impatiently. The water beneath me was a green colour, full and sullen, but there were little eddies which I could not understand considering the width of the channel. Then, with a shock which, notwithstanding the hot sun, brought a shiver of fear through my body, I discovered the truth. Scarcely three feet under water was a long line of jagged rock. I turned over on my back and held up my hand.

"Arthur!"

"Get out of the way, will you?" he shouted. "I'm coming."

His hands were already upraised. There was no time for anything but the truth.



"Don't be a fool," I answered. "There's a submerged rock right across here." *Page* 191.

"Don't be a fool," I answered. "There's a submerged rock right across here. You couldn't miss it. Climb down, do you hear?"

His arms fell to his sides. For a single moment he stood there, immovable. Not even his youth, his bathing costume, and the clear background of blue sky and sunlit air could lend him any grace of form or outline. He seemed, indeed, from his short neck and hunched shoulders, as he turned away, almost deformed. I looked all around. There was no sign anywhere of Duncombe. I raised my voice and shouted.

"Hello, Duncombe!"

I heard a splash, as though he had slipped off the ledge of the rock behind me. Presently he came swimming round the corner.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. "And where's Arthur?"

"He's climbing down from that rock," I answered, as Duncombe came alongside. "I've just stopped his diving into this pool."

"Why?"

He was by my side now and I pointed down-

wards to the dark line of cruelly jagged rock. He looked for a moment concerned.

"Jove, I've never noticed those!" he muttered.

"They're barely three feet," I answered. "I can reach them."

Duncombe turned over on his back. We were in the shadow, almost surrounded by rocks. The voices of the others, preparing the lunch, sounded a long way away. I suddenly felt as though I were cut off, as though I could read the thoughts at the back of this man's brain, as though I myself were in danger. All the time he was drawing a little closer to me.

Leonard and Ella Duncombe suddenly appeared upon the summit of one of the lower ranges of rocks.

"Come along to lunch," the former shouted.

The moment had passed. Duncombe began to swim vigorously for the shore. He was quite himself when he stepped out on to the sand.

"I wouldn't make a fuss about that, if I were you, Lister," he suggested. "It looks as though I weren't careful enough. As a

matter of fact, I don't think the boy would have come to any harm."

Arthur was seated by himself on the sands, his arms clenched around his knees, his face turned away from all of us. He seemed to have ignored the summons to prepare for lunch.

"Probably not," I answered, trying to speak in as unconcerned a tone as possible. "Boys and drunken men have a wonderful knack of avoiding accidents."

We strolled up the beach together. Duncombe paused and spoke to Arthur.

"Come along," he said, "they're waiting luncheon for us."

Arthur turned and looked at him. I could not say that there was anything either malicious or reproachful in that look, and yet it worried me. He made no answer in words. A few moments later, however, he scrambled to his feet and went to the rock behind which his clothes were lying.

Duncombe seemed determined that nothing which had happened should interfere with the success of the picnic. He abandoned all his

reserve, related anecdotes, chaffed everybody in turn, opened wine, and absolutely created an atmosphere of pleasure. Leonard told stories and Rose sang to us and danced upon the sands. Arthur, after a preliminary fit of gloom, drank far too much champagne for his age and became, in his rather clumsy way, as light-hearted as the rest. He and Ella sat for some time apart from the others, his arm drawn through hers, until presently they wandered off together to look for Venetian shells, the spoils of some long-forgotten shipwreck. On the whole, the excursion which I had seen foredoomed to failure, turned out a great success. Duncombe only once, during the rest of the afternoon, referred to the disturbing subject.

"You don't suppose," he suggested, "that Arthur is thinking any more about that little affair, eh?"

"Why should he?" I answered coolly. "He must know that you made a mistake."

"Naturally," Duncombe assented. "I still don't think he'd have come to any harm unless

he bungled his dive, but I'm glad, all the same, that you noticed the rocks."

That marked the end of the incidents worthy of note connected with the picnic, except that Arthur and Ella stayed away for over an hour, and that when they returned she was clinging to his arm with an almost protective air. That night, for the first time, not a single member from the Grange turned up at our performance.

Somehow or other, when I started for my customary early morning walk on the following day, I knew that there was tragedy in the air. A strange mist, presage of storm and heat, hung like an oppressive curtain over the land and stretched out seawards. I almost regretted, as I stood at the end of the little jetty, that I had not departed from my usual custom and bathed. The thought made me look back towards the shore. Duncombe, in his dressing gown, had just left the gardens of the Grange and was descending the shingle to the sands. I watched him throw off his gown and wade into the water. Presently he turned on his side and began swimming slowly

out. Watching him, I felt more than ever inclined to go and fetch my own bathing clothes. Then, as I hesitated, I noticed Arthur, following through the Grange gardens, scramble down the shingle, throw off his dressing gown and also plunge into the sea. Something a little furtive about the manner in which he made his way across the lawn, keeping always to the side of the hedge as though to escape observation, and his subsequent almost crawling progress along the shingle, puzzled me. I had been down here many mornings, but I had never seen Arthur bathing before. He was in the water now, and swimming out with long, powerful strokes towards Duncombe.

Whilst Arthur was still almost undistinguishable in the sea, and Duncombe was lying lazily on his back, as yet unconscious of his pupil's approach, I began to feel my first misgivings. There was something unnatural in the very atmosphere that morning, the sulphurous gloom, the entire absence of sunshine, the still, oily water. I found myself straining my eyes to catch a nearer glimpse of the boy's

face, asking myself all the time why he had chosen this particular morning to bathe for the first time before breakfast. Nearer and nearer he came. He passed me within a matter of fifty yards, but he took no notice of my shout of greeting. Then, as he rolled from side to side, I caught a glimpse of his face. He seemed to be swimming in entire unconsciousness of any physical effort. His chin was a little protruded, his eyes were fixed in an unnatural stare upon the spot where Duncombe lay floating. For a moment or two I felt a queer sensation of helplessness. I called out again, and I knew this time, although I would not acknowledge it to myself, that my cry was meant to be a warning to Duncombe. He heard me, turned over on his side, and to my horror began to swim away from the approaching form, to swim away like a man in fear.

I really did all that a man could do. Attached by a rope to the end of the jetty were several rowing boats. I unfastened one, clambered down some steps and jumped into it. As I swung it round, I was just in time to see the boy alter his pace a little, as though to

intercept Duncombe, who had made for the jetty. Duncombe, seeing himself cut off, hesitated. I held up my hand and shouted.

"Hullo, there!" I bawled. "Hullo! Duncombe, I'm coming to take you in."

Arthur took not the slightest notice of me. He was now within a yard or so of Duncombe, and he suddenly seemed to raise himself from the water. I had no doubt whatever then but that this was tragedy. His mouth was opened, and his rather prominent teeth showed in a wholly animal fashion. His eyes seemed like specks of fire. He was by the side of Duncombe now, and from where I was I can only say that it seemed to me as though he sprang at him just as a sea cat might have done, if such a creature had ever existed. His arms went round the other man's neck, his legs around his loins. Then for the first time Duncombe cried out, a horrible cry, the cry of a man face to face with a hideous death, a cry which died away only as the water filled his mouth. Very slowly, Duncombe struggling in the other's pitiless clasp like a weakling in the grip of an octopus, the two bodies disappeared.

I rowed about for more than half an hour without seeing a sign of either. They were washed up two days later.

The supper at a Midland Hotel, where our chief bade us meet him a few evenings later, was one of the least festive of all our meetings. Our depression was so noticeable that he presently commented upon it.

"For whom this sorrow?" he enquired coldly. "For the tutor or his charge?"

"For the boy," Rose declared. "After all, he was very young."

"I'm sorry for Duncombe," Leonard admitted frankly. "Whatever he'd been up to, it was the most horrible death any one could die."

"I'm sorry for both," I insisted. "I think that somehow we ought to have prevented it."

Mr. Thomson looked at us, one by one, out of his bright piercing eyes. It was obvious that he was out of sympathy with us.

"I continually forget," he said coldly, "that I have to deal with sentimentalists. No person who looked upon life from a sane point of

view, and who possessed full knowledge of all the facts, could possibly regret the departure of either of them."

"Was Duncombe's story really true?" Rose asked.

"This one is, at any rate," our host replied. "Arthur Dompers was the orphan son of a Welsh miner. When he was fourteen years of age, a relative in America died intestate and this boy was discovered to be the heir. Some lawyers in London were entrusted with the charge of him. He was sent to four private schools, from each one of which he was expelled. Three tutors one by one relinquished the task of training him up in the way he should go. Duncombe was the fourth."

"Tell us about Mr. Duncombe, please," Rose begged.

"Duncombe was one of those criminals who are too clever to come under the ban of the law," Thomson continued. "He was also a person against whom I had a very strong grievance. When I heard that the boy, Arthur Dompers, had been committed to his charge, I felt that, if carefully watched, Duncombe's

time had come at last. By some irony of fate, the fortune left to Arthur Dompers became trebled and quadrupled in the hands of his trustees. Duncombe's appetite for plunder, already insatiable, must have become a fever. He was clever, though. He bided his time. For three years he had charge of Arthur Dompers, and during that three years he improved him immensely. It was perfectly clear what he was waiting for — for the only period when the boy could be of real service to him — namely after his twenty-first birthday. He made his plans a long way ahead. With great cunning he kept secret the day of the boy's majority. You attended a picnic, I think — a birthday party?"

"It was supposed to be his twentieth birthday," Leonard observed.

"In reality his twenty-first," Thomson went on. "On the morning of that day, the boy made his will, leaving the bulk of his estate to Ella Duncombe, and large legacies to the rest of the family. He also left a letter addressed to Ella Duncombe, in which he made clear the relations between them and spoke of

their impending marriage. With those documents in his possession, Duncombe had no more use for the boy. There is no doubt, from your report, Lister, that he deliberately made his first attempt upon his life on that very morning. There is no doubt, also, that the boy, half-witted though he was, in his sullen way saw through the whole thing. His hate for Duncombe became a slow-burning passion — and there, I think, is the story of the tragedy."

"And the will?" I asked.

"It was committed to the flames on the morning of the tragedy by Duncombe's sister — also the letter. The estate goes to the Crown."

Rose sighed.

"All that money and no one any better off!"

Mr. Thomson shrugged his shoulders.

"The lawyers to the estate," he told us, "have made over ten thousand pounds to the Duncombe family."

I took my courage into my hands.

"I know your attitude towards questions, sir," I said, "but I feel bound to ask you

one concerning this episode. What on earth did you expect to gain by bringing us in touch with it?"

Our host sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"I do not welcome questions," he admitted, "but bearing in mind the fact that this affair has been without any features of interest for you, I will reply. I knew perfectly well that Duncombe would make some attempt upon the life of Arthur Dompers. You were there to watch for it. You succeeded. Your report would have released the boy from Duncombe's control. Events, however, marched too quickly."

"On whose behalf, then, were we acting," Leonard asked, "you and all of us? Were we philanthropists or detectives?"

Our host shrugged his shoulders and helped himself to a cigar.

"That," he replied, "will be Conundrum Number Five."

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER SIX

### THE DUKE'S DILEMMA

"How does one address a duke?" Rose asked, looking up from the depth of her easy-chair.

"No idea," I replied. "I don't suppose we shall see anything of him."

"I only knew one," Leonard murmured reminiscently. "He was at Harrow and we used to call him Tubby."

"I don't see that that's going to help us," Rose remarked. "However ——"

Then the door of our sitting room opened and to our surprise our host entered. He bowed to Rose and nodded to us in friendly fashion.

"Very good of you to come down here and help us along," he said, pleasantly ignoring the fact that we were being paid fifty pounds a week and our expenses to help provide his

guests with entertainment. "I hope you're quite comfortable?"

We all three murmured an unqualified affirmative. The arrangements made for our comfort were indeed beyond criticism.

"You're not any relation to the Cotton who started bowling googlies for Harrow in his last term, I suppose?" the Duke queried, addressing Leonard.

Leonard modestly pleaded guilty, and our host showed his first signs of real interest.

"You'll play for the Castle this afternoon?" he begged. "We're playing the rest of the County, and they're bringing a pretty hot side. Our batting's all right but our bowling's rotten."

"I haven't played for two years," Leonard said, a little doubtfully.

"At three o'clock," the Duke announced, ignoring Leonard's hesitation. "You'll find a couple of pros down at the nets if you want a knock first. Don't give your bowling away too much, as some of the enemy are prowling around."

Our host took gracious leave of us. Rose watched him curiously.

"Maurice," she observed, as the door closed, "there's something queer about this place."

"I suppose there must be," I admitted, "or we shouldn't be here."

"Exactly what are our instructions?" Leonard enquired.

"Vague," I replied. "The only letter I received from our chief told me to accept the offer through Keith, Prowse, to come here, to sit tight and study conditions."

"What did he mean by 'conditions'?" Rose asked.

"Just get in touch with our environment, I suppose. For instance, here we are with half a dozen others, brought up to Westmoreland to amuse the Duke's house party. We are being treated royally, the house party seems to comprise some of the best-known names in England, and the whole thing seems to be marvellously done."

"But so far no glimmering as to how or where we may come in?" Leonard persisted.

"Not the slightest," I admitted. "Of

course, this place is a perfect treasure house. They say that the jewels alone are insured for more than two millions. There may be some robbery scheme on."

"Perhaps," Rose suggested, "we are to be the thieves. In that case, I'll keep one of the famous pink pearls if I have to swallow it."

I looked out across the park and a certain feeling of depression stole over me. We were alone in a little sitting room which had been made over to our exclusive use.

"I can't help wishing," I confessed, "that we knew a little more where we stood. We've been working for Mr. Thomson now for the best part of a year, and there isn't one of us three can tell whether we've been helping the greatest crook the world has ever known, or a master detective."

"I'm not sure that I care," Rose said sweetly.

Leonard helped himself to a cigarette.

"When I think of that night at Cromer," he reflected — "you remember how wet it was, how the wind howled, and we hadn't enough fire in our lodgings, or enough money

to buy food? — when I think of those days and realise how life has changed since our mysterious god came out of the machine, I feel very much like Rose. I feel like a pagan, Maurice. We're back again in our old lives, wearing the right sort of clothes, eating and drinking like civilised beings, travelling in comfort, and with a bank account growing all the time. It's good enough for me."

"And for me," Rose echoed.

I fell in with their mood. After all, the sun was shining and a long summer's day lay before us.

"Begone, dull care," I invoked, "at any rate until our next letter of instructions arrives. Into flannels, Leonard, and then to the nets. I suppose they'll let me have a knock."

"I shall come and watch," Rose decided graciously.

Our entertainment at Lorringham Castle was in its way princely. We had a suite of rooms to ourselves, and a dining room which we shared with Charles Jacoty, the leader of the Duke's private orchestra, David Faraday,

the famous illusionist, a Mrs. Middleham, widow of the Duke's private chaplain, who arranged the dance programmes and painted the menus, and a young man — Gerald Formby — the son of Sir James Formby, the agent to the estate, who presided at the dinner table and from whom we heard most of the gossip of the place. It was on the evening after the cricket match that we received from him the first inkling as to what the nature of our mission might be.

"Have you seen the Lorringham treasures yet?" he asked Rose.

She shook her head.

"I don't even know what they are."

The young man appeared incredulous.

"You mean to say that you haven't heard of the Lorringham pearls and the seven tiaras?"

"I've heard of them vaguely," she replied. "I didn't even know that they were on view."

Jacoty leaned a little forward in his chair. Faraday also appeared to be interested. The young man lowered his voice a little. There was inherited awe in its inflexion.

"The Lorringham pink pearls," he said, "are the most famous in history, although they are very seldom seen. They were last worn, in fact, by Eleanor, Duchess of Lorringham, at Queen Victoria's wedding. The seven tiaras are famous throughout the world. The earliest dates from the time of Charles the First."

"And they are really on view?" Rose asked.

"Not to the public. Whenever there is a house party here, they are generally shown to the guests."

"They are immensely valuable, these jewels?" Faraday enquired.

"They are insured for two millions," was the young man's portentous reply.

There was a little silence. I chanced to glance at Faraday, and I was almost startled by the gleam in his sunken eyes. He sat like a man in a brown study, tapping the tablecloth with his fingers.

"Has any attempt at robbery ever been made?" Leonard asked.

Gerald Formby shook his head.

"They are too well guarded," he said.

"It is interesting, this," Faraday remarked quietly. "Are the jewels kept in safes?"

The young man smiled.

"The room in which they are is in itself a safe. There are steel shutters to the windows, and steel safes let into the wall. There is a man on guard outside, day and night, and the only key in existence which could unlock the safes is in the possession of the Duke himself."

My eyes met Leonard's. For the first time I understood the only three words of admonition which we had received:

Watch the Duke.

Faraday spoke what was in my own mind.

"That fact may do away with some risk," he observed, "but isn't it rather a danger to his Grace? Fancy being in constant possession of a key which secures a treasure like that!"

"And you mean to say that no one has ever made any attempt to steal them?" Rose asked.

"Once only, twenty-two years ago, in the late Duke's time," Formby admitted. "A

gang of burglars — they say that Charles Peace was one of them — broke into the Castle, but they never got anywhere near the room. Soon after that these shutters were built, and the safes let into the wall, and quite recently an American expert came over, who designed the lock. Robbery is now an impossibility."

We gave our first performance later on that evening. The Duke himself came up and congratulated us afterwards. He invited us to join the rest of the guests, a courteous offer of which, however, we did not avail ourselves.

"You will at least join my personally conducted party," he suggested, turning to Rose, "and have a look at the Lorringham treasures? I am taking a few of my guests there at eleven o'clock. I shall expect you three."

We accepted that invitation willingly enough, and the Duke returned to his guests. Afterwards, Faraday gave one of the most astonishing performances of sleight of hand I have ever seen. With scarcely any appliances, he succeeded in puzzling everybody. One of the guests, selected at random, was

made to disappear in such a fashion that he himself, when questioned afterwards, was utterly confused about his experience. Later on he brought a locked-up mastiff from his kennel and a singing bird down from the top of the great hall. The Duke, with several of his companions, came up to congratulate the illusionist. Faraday received their compliments with the grave pleasure of one who recognises his supremacy. As the Duke was leaving, he addressed him.

"I heard your Grace inviting Miss Mindel and her companions to inspect the treasure chamber to-night," he said. "May I be permitted to accompany them?"

The Duke seemed on the point of giving a ready consent, then suddenly he hesitated. He looked at Faraday with a dubious smile.

"After that performance of yours, Mr. Faraday," he confessed, "I really don't know what to say. I seem to have a horrible vision of watching my tiaras come out through the steel doors, and my pink pearls drop out from the ceiling into your waistcoat pocket."

Faraday did not smile. It seemed to me that he was very much in earnest.

"I will undertake to refrain from any extempore performance," he said. "As a matter of fact, your Grace, there are limitations to my magic."

The Duke turned away. He seemed rather to resent the other's persistence.

"Another time, perhaps," he promised, a little coldly. "My party to-night is made up."

Faraday was standing a little in the shadows and I watched him eagerly. From that moment our mission to Lorringham Castle seemed to become clearer to me.

An hour or so later, our host led a small company of us to the treasure chamber. We paused outside a green baize door leading into one of the galleries, which was guarded by a servant in the livery of the house. The Duke, with a word of apology, took off his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, disclosing a plain platinum band around his arm.

"This is an American idea," he explained.

He touched a spring in the band, one side opened and disclosed a key, attached to a thin

chain of platinum wire. With this he unlocked the door of a small chamber, brilliantly lit. One side of the room seemed to be composed, up to the height of about six feet, of solid steel shutters. The Duke fitted the other end of the key into a concealed crevice. There was a little click, and the whole of the shutters rolled back. From behind windows of solid plate-glass, on a background of black velvet, were displayed the famous tiaras, rows of marvellous pearls, some of them as large as marbles and pink as sea coral, and a further collection of magnificent jewellery. There seemed to be an almost universal gasp of astonishment. The women of the party especially were speechless.

"We keep them like this instead of in coffers," the Duke explained, "so that they can be shown without being handled."

"Supposing you wanted to get at them?" some one asked.

"There is a secret spring," he replied, "which releases these windows. You should look at the diamonds in that Queen Anne tiara, Lady Mordaunt," he added, turning to

There seemed to be an almost universal gasp of astonishment. *Page* 216.

one of his guests. "The greatest diamond expert in the world, who was here last year, declared that he had never seen stones to match those in his life."

We gazed, we admired, we marvelled. In a few minutes the show was over, the doors locked, the key back in its wonderful hiding place, and the Duke's coat once more hanging from his shapely shoulders.

"I don't wear this platinum affair except when I am down here," he told us. "The rest of the time I leave it at my banker's. Tell me what you are thinking about, Miss Mindel?" he asked, turning to her with a smile.

Rose answered him frankly.

"I was wondering why you wouldn't let Mr. Faraday come with us."

The Duke frowned slightly.

"Well," he admitted, "I suppose it was foolish of me. All the same, the man's performance took away my breath. Of course," he went on, "I know that it was all illusion, and yet it doesn't seem to me any more wonderful to think of his thrusting his hand through my plate-glass windows and helping

himself to my pearls, than to perform some of the feats he achieved this evening. The guardianship of several million pounds' worth of family treasures," he concluded, with an apologetic smile, " sometimes tends to make one unreasonable."

Leonard and I turned into the little smoking room assigned to our use, after we had said good night to Rose. Faraday was seated there alone, with a block and pencil in his hand, apparently making idle sketches. He laid the block by his side, face downwards, at our entrance.

" Well," he said, a little ill-naturedly, " I suppose you've seen the treasures? "

" We have," I admitted, helping myself to a whisky and soda.

" Are they as wonderful as report says? " he enquired.

" I'm no judge," I told him, a little shortly.

"By the bye, there's a note for you on the table."

I recognised at once the familiar, typewritten envelope — a message from the chief.

Leonard looked over my shoulder as I tore open the envelope:

> Watch Faraday. Suspect Edwards, one of the custodians. Registered post to-morrow brings you key of door leading to balcony, end of north gallery.

I tore the note into small pieces. Faraday sat watching me with gloomy curiosity.

"Nothing annoying, I hope?" he queried.

I watched the pieces filter through my fingers into the waste-paper basket.

"Nothing of any importance," I assured him.

The next day several things happened. In the first place, the key of the door leading to the little gallery facing the jewel chamber arrived, wrapped in tissue paper and with an obliterated postmark. Secondly, I took five wickets for fifteen against the team brought over from a neighbouring country house, and Leonard, by indefensible slogging, managed to knock up fifty-five before he was caught on the boundary. These last two episodes seemed to obliterate all memory of the professional character of our stay. The Duke, who had

played a very useful innings himself, and whose joy at winning the match was almost like a schoolboy's, treated us as honoured guests and insisted upon all three of us accepting his invitation to dine in the great hall that evening. The third event of the day was the coming of the Princess Anne of Chantilly, the last representative of a famous French family, a great heiress, related to royalty, and one of the beauties of the world. The three of us chanced to witness her arrival, and our host's secret was manifest in the first few minutes. In her presence he seemed rejuvenated. He watched her every movement. The slight austerity of his tone and deportment vanished as though by magic. A new and more genial side of him appeared. He paid his court almost openly. It did not need the gossip of the place to tell us that he was her suitor.

I was ready for dinner early that evening and strolled up and down the north gallery, waiting for Rose, who was naturally taking some pains with her toilette. I made my way as though by accident to the notice board containing the names of the watchmen selected

from the menservants of the establishment. There were eleven altogether, and the watch for the next twenty-four hours had just been put in. For the first time I saw there the name of Edwards. He was on duty, it seemed, from three to six on the following morning. I felt a little shiver of excitement as I strolled away, after a surreptitious glance at the little gallery. The beginning of my task was close at hand.

Dinner that night was a pageant rather than a meal. Sixty-four of us sat down at a long table, the decoration of which with hothouse flowers had taken two gardeners the greater part of the day. We were served from gold plate and we drank strange wines from Venetian glasses. The Duke sat at one end of the table, with the Princess at his right hand, and his sister, the Marchioness of Leicestershire, sat at the other end. The Princess, of whom I had a good view, was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. She was fair and slim, with a perfect complexion, dark, rather tired eyes, a fascinating mouth, and corn-coloured hair, whose seemingly simple arrangement was an artistic triumph. The one re-

markable thing about her, though, was that she wore not a single article of jewellery. Her neck and bosom were bare, her fingers were ringless. I ventured to remark upon this fact to my neighbour, whose acquaintance I had made on the cricket field. She glanced down the table and nodded.

" The Princess has strange fancies," she remarked. " I have seen her wearing the Chantilly emeralds at a small dinner party, and afterwards go to a Court function wearing the jewels of an ingénue."

I looked back at her with a very genuine admiration.

" She ought to marry the Duke," I whispered, " if only for the sake of wearing the wonderful pink pearls."

My companion smiled.

" She would look better in them than any woman in the world," she agreed. " The pity of it is that she would only be able to wear them up here, and for a woman of her cosmopolitan tastes, Westmoreland would seem a little confining."

"But if she were Duchess of Lorringham?"

My companion shook her head.

"The jewels are a very solemn family trust," she told me. "I believe I am right in saying that they cannot be taken out of the United Kingdom. One of the famous tiaras was stolen about a hundred years ago in London, and the deed of trust was amended then. I suppose it is quite all right," she went on meditatively, "but in a way it seems a cruel thing to keep jewels of such value practically hidden."

We gave our little entertainment that evening, after which a great pianist who had travelled down from London gave a recital, Faraday made more magic, and a girl, who was one of the house party, danced. All the time our host never left the Princess's side. There was no doubt at all but that he was deeply in love with her. She, for her part, won all hearts. She was gracious and charming to every one. She seemed, indeed, to the Duke's delight, to almost assume at times the position of gracious chatelaine. A thought came to me during the evening and I sought

out young Formby, with whom Leonard and I had become quite intimate. I found him with some of the younger spirits in the billiard room. I drew him on one side whilst he was waiting to play his shot at pool.

"Formby," I said, "I don't want to seem impertinent but I should like to ask you a question."

"Go ahead," the young man invited.

"Is the Duke a rich man?" I asked.

Formby looked at me in astonishment.

"What on earth makes you ask a question like that?" he demanded curiously.

"Well, I really haven't any reason," I hastened to assure him. "I just wondered, that's all."

"The Duke," he told me impressively, "is one of the richest men in England. He spends money in a princely fashion but he has never yet succeeded in spending half his income. What about a game of snooker — you and Cotton, too, if he likes? We are breaking up after this. Sir Charles wants to dance."

I left Cotton there and went in search of Rose. I found her on the balcony in our own

sitting room, looking down at the guests — strange, picturesque figures as they strolled about the moon-dappled lawn, listening to the music.

"Maurice," she asked me, as I sank into a chair by her side, "have you found out yet what we are here for?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I replied. "The chief has been even less communicative than usual. It seems to have something to do with the jewels and that is all I know."

"You don't think," she went on nervously, "that by any chance we are sent here to aid in any attempt to steal them?"

"No, I don't think that," I assured her. "Where the chief stands sometimes I can't quite make up my mind, but I don't think a jewel robbery, even on such a scale as this, is quite in his line. If our presence here has anything to do with jewels at all, and I think it has," I added, dropping my voice, "I should say that we were here indirectly to aid their guardians."

"Then why doesn't the Duke mention it to us?" she asked curiously.

"It's beyond me," I confessed.

She laid her hand upon my arm and drew me very near indeed.

"Maurice," she whispered, "there's something wrong about Faraday."

"Go on," I begged her.

"Well, for one thing, then, what does he want with a ninety horse-power car, concerning which he hasn't said a word to any of us? I saw him driving it in the lower stretches of the park this morning."

"Well, that might be any man's hobby," I replied. "What else?"

"I found him poring over a map this afternoon," she continued. "I looked over his shoulder. It was a road map of Westmoreland, and I am perfectly certain that he was tracing out the road from here to the sea. It is only twenty miles."

I nodded.

"Well," I said, "let us assume, then, that Faraday means to make an attempt to steal the jewels, that he has a high-powered car in readiness, and a boat of some sort waiting by the sea. I dare say that part of it might be

managed all right. It's a desolate coast, the road to it lies over a mountain range, and he could easily start from a place where there is no telephone or telegraph. But — it's the robbery itself that seems to me so impossible. I can't conceive how any one could get at the Duke's key, and, having got it, how they could pass the man on duty at the door, to say nothing of leaving the Castle afterwards."

"Most robberies seem like that until afterwards," Rose answered, a little drily.

"Besides," I argued, "Faraday is, in his way, a famous man. He must earn several thousands a year. Why should he run such appalling risks?"

"Go and look at the *Era,* which I left on the sitting-room table," she enjoined. "Look at the paragraph at the bottom of the sixth page."

I obeyed her, and read with a little start of surprise of the great reception accorded to Faraday at Melbourne the previous week.

"What does it mean?" I asked Rose, when I returned.

"It means that this man isn't Faraday at

all," she declared. "I was doubtful of him from the first. I saw Faraday at the Coliseum about two years ago, and I am sure that he was a much older man."

"In that case," I said thoughtfully, "I suppose it is our duty to warn the Duke."

"You must do as you think best," Rose decided.

I made my way reluctantly downstairs and turned into the gardens where I was told the Duke was. I found him at the end of a rose pergola. The Princess was seated by his side, and at the sound of their voices I hesitated and would have turned back. The Duke, however, recognised me and called out. In the bright moonlight which was flooding the gardens, he seemed unnaturally pale. His tone, too, when he addressed me, had lost its smooth, pleasant intonation. He was like a man who has been undergoing torture. The slight smile upon the Princess's lips chilled and depressed me. I felt that it was not a pleasant interview which I had disturbed.

"Were you looking for me, Lister?" the Duke asked.

"In a sense I was, your Grace," I admitted. "I — er — there was a little matter I thought I ought to mention to you."

"Well?"

I felt suddenly that my mission was ridiculous and my suspicions intolerable. Since I was there, however, I had to go through with it.

"The man Faraday, the illusionist," I began ——

"Well, what about him?" the Duke interrupted sharply.

"Some one who saw Faraday perform at the Coliseum two years ago," I continued, "is of opinion that this man is not Faraday at all. The suspicion is confirmed by the fact that, according to this week's *Era,* Faraday is performing in Melbourne."

"I have no doubt that your information is correct," the Duke replied coldly. "Now I come to think of it, I believe the agents told me that they were sending a Faraday man but not Faraday himself. You surely had some reason for bringing me this — information?"

The wild absurdity of the whole thing made

me feel like a fool. Then I remembered, however, that we had been deliberately sent here by our Machiavellian chief, and we had never been sent anywhere in vain.

"It must sound idiotic, your Grace," I confessed, "but we were all very much impressed by the precautions against robbery connected with your jewel chamber. The fact that there was a man staying here to whom you yourself preferred not to show the jewels — staying here under a false name, with a ninety-horse-power motor car in the garage ——"

The Duke interrupted me with a slight exclamation and a little wave of the hand.

"I never dreamed that you were such an old woman, Lister," he said. "I am much obliged to you for your warning," he added, with some return of his old courtesy. "As it happens, however, I was already aware that this man was not Faraday himself, and I fancy that my precautions for guarding the Lorringham treasures are adequate."

The Princess leaned a little forward. I sympathised with the Duke. In this faint,

enchanting light, she was ravishingly beautiful.

"Do not be too confident, dear host," she murmured. "If women were only made of sterner stuff, a lock has never been fashioned which could keep a pearl lover from your jewel chamber."

The Duke smiled.

"Nevertheless," he added, turning to me with a friendly gesture of dismissal, "you may sleep soundly to-night and as many nights as you remain under my roof. The spells are not yet woven which could charm those jewels from their cases."

I made my way back to the Castle, a little confused. There seemed to be in the Duke's last words a subtle behest to me, a warning not to concern myself further in his affairs. And from three to six on this coming morning, Edwards was guard of the chamber, and my rôle of watcher was already established.

It must have been within a few seconds of the chiming of a quarter past three, that the intense silence of the gallery, into which I had found my way without difficulty, was broken

in even the slightest degree. Opposite where I crouched, in a high-backed chair, with a glass of cold water by his side, sat the custodian of the jewel chamber. A little to the right was the narrow passage leading to the Duke's apartments. Two electric lights were burning, and through one of the windows came pale splashes of faint moonlight. The effect was a weird and confusing illumination which made it hard to recognise even the simplest objects. The armoured figures cast fantastic shadows across the floor, the outline of the watching man seemed distorted and unreal, and the whole setting of the little scene was unnatural, a stimulus to nervous imagination. For this very reason I covered my eyes and looked again for a moment at the apparition which at first presented every semblance of the impossible. The second time I knew that I had not been deceived — I knew that something was happening.

The end of that little passage leading from the Duke's apartments to the watching figure was wrapped in gloom. The faint creaking which had first attracted my attention might

have come from an unseen door there, or it might have been the not unnatural creaking of timbers in an old house. The sound, however, was followed by a strange vision. I saw an arm stretched out from the shadows, linger for a moment over the tumbler, and then disappear. I rubbed my eyes. Was this Faraday and his toy magic, or reality? I waited. It might have been ten minutes before the next happening. The watcher in the chair stretched out his arm, lifted the tumbler to his lips and drank. After that there was silence again. Then from the spot where the arm had come, a figure dressed in black stole out, the figure of a man of medium height, without betraying collar or shirt front, black as a bat save for the pale blur of an indistinguishable face, and noiseless. He stooped over the custodian, now evidently either asleep or unconscious. In a moment or two he stood upright, paused before the door of the jewel chamber, and with a curious, apparently effortless movement, passed through it. Then it seemed to me that my time had come for action. I stole quietly down the few stairs, unfastened the door of

the gallery, and crept up the corridor. The door of the jewel chamber was ajar, and through it I could see the shining of the electric light inside, a glimmer of which fell upon the face of the drugged custodian. Suddenly, upon the very threshold of the jewel chamber, I stopped short. All my wariness was gone, lost in a shock of surprise. A little exclamation broke from my lips. The next second I found myself struggling for my life. The walls swam round. I raised my voice and gave a great cry. After that there was silence.

At twelve o'clock the next morning, with a bandage around my head, and feeling still the effects of an almost delirious night, I stepped into the car which was waiting to take us to the station. The Duke, who was practising at the cricket nets, came hurrying across to us, his bat still in his hand.

"I had no idea that you were going by this early train!" he exclaimed. "So glad that I did not miss you altogether."

Rose murmured something polite, and Leonard said a word or two about the pleasure of our stay. I remained silent.

"I am afraid," our host continued, smiling at me, "that I was a little unsympathetic in the small hours of the morning. I am never at my best when I am roused from sleep. However, you must let me express my regrets to you now, Mr. Lister, for your little accident. At the same time," he went on, "I am sure you will agree with me that the neighborhood of the jewel chamber is rather a dangerous place for a man addicted to nightmares to be wandering about at three o'clock in the morning."

I looked the Duke in the face.

"What I saw was no nightmare," I said. "I saw some sort of powder dropped into Edwards' glass, and I saw a man pass into the jewel chamber."

The Duke smiled tolerantly.

"My dear Mr. Lister," he protested, "if the man Edwards had been drugged as you suggest, could he have attacked you in the way he did and got the better of you in a scrap? Further, how was it possible for any one to open the door of the jewel chamber without a key?"

He rolled up the sleeve of his flannel shirt a little higher, touched the spring of his platinum bracelet, showed us the key and replaced it. I said nothing. I continued to watch the Duke's face.

" Perhaps the most satisfactory part of your hallucination," he went on, " is the fact that the jewels have neither been disturbed nor removed. I beg, Mr. Lister," he concluded indulgently, " that you will not let this unfortunate incident disturb any agreeable impressions you may have had of your stay here. It has been a great pleasure to me to entertain you. If you will allow me to refer for a moment to a business matter, my steward has sent a cheque this morning to your agent. And if you will allow me to offer you a slight memento of your stay here, I will ask you to accept this bat from me. It is one of Wisden's, and I think the best I have ever handled.

He held it out to me, and there passed between us one of those long and silent glances which convey more than words. I held out my hand and accepted the bat.

"Thank you, Duke," I said.

He stood away and lifted his cap. Then we drove off.

Mr. Thomson had his own methods of surprising us. Three nights after our return to town, we found ourselves, for instance, under the great plane tree at Ranelagh, drinking wonderful yellow chartreuse with our coffee, listening to the music and to the little murmur of pleasant, after-dinner conversation. The moment for which I had waited so eagerly had come at last.

"On this occasion," our host remarked tolerantly, "I feel that I must be a little more lenient than usual as regards questions. You came away from Lorringham a little puzzled, I have no doubt?"

"We did indeed," I replied. "We want to know why the Duke was engaged in a conspiracy to steal his own jewels, and why our mission there seemed to be to prevent it."

"Quite a little romance," our host observed. "The Duke, as you may have noticed, is very

much in love with the Princess of Chantilly. The Princess is one of those women in whom the love of jewels amounts to a passion. The Lorringham pink pearls are, as you may know, priceless. More than anything in the world the Princess desires to wear those pearls."

"Then why doesn't she acquire them by marrying the Duke?" I asked.

"Because," Mr. Thomson explained, "in the trust deed relating to the jewels they can none of them be moved outside the United Kingdom. The Princess would never live in England for more than a month or so in the year, which means that she would be separated from the jewels she loves for the greater part of the time. The Duke has taken every sort of legal opinion, and there is no doubt that if they were stolen from the Castle and returned to him in some foreign country, there is no law which could compel him to bring them back here. That is why the Duke connived at the theft, which you prevented."

The elucidation was simple enough but scarcely satisfactory.

"If I had known this," I confessed, "I'm

afraid my sympathies would have been with the Duke."

Mr. Thomson smiled indulgently.

"That proves, then," he said, "how wise I am to explain these little affairs with which you chance to become associated, afterwards instead of before. You were acting for the insurance companies, who would have to pay a very large sum to the vested estate if the jewels were stolen from Lorringham. On their behalf," he added, handing me an oblong strip of paper, "I am asked to hand you this cheque for five hundred pounds."

I passed it over to Leonard, who usually kept our accounts.

"All the same," I observed, "I don't wonder the Duke thought I was a meddlesome idiot."

"His Grace has probably forgiven you," Mr. Thomson remarked, "for the Princess has relented at last. If you buy an evening paper on your way home, you will see that they were married by special license this afternoon."

We found plenty to think and talk about for the next few minutes. Then Mr. Thomson,

who had been leaning back in his chair, watching the stars and listening to the music, electrified us.

"In one month," he said, "the year for which you pledged your services to me will be up. At the end of that time we shall say good-by."

"You will not want us again?" Rose asked.

Mr. Thomson shook his head.

"Please do not consider that any reflection upon your efforts," he begged. "During the last ten years I have had assistants in every walk of life. No one has served me more intelligently or on the whole more successfully than you three. The fact of the matter is that I am going to retire."

"Retire from what?" I asked him impetuously. "Who are you? What are you? I have never been able to make up my mind whether we have been on the side of the sheep or the goats. How did you become interested, for instance, in this last affair? Did the insurance companies give you a brief? And if so, did they give it to a master criminal, to police headquarters, or to a private detective?"

"Shall we call that Conundrum Number Six?" Mr. Thomson suggested, watching the ash on his cigar. "You understand, of course, that we are going to have a grand finale. You have a week in which to rest, and I think a study of your banking account will prove that you are justified in taking a holiday if you wish to. On next Thursday evening, at six o'clock, I desire that all three of you will be at the rooms which you are now occupying in Clarges Street. You will there receive a message from me. I shall ask your help once more before I retire into private life — and safety."

The music surged in our ears, and the froth of light conversation filled the air. Of all the little groups of people seated about, we alone seemed to have our faces set towards the serious things. Perhaps our host noticed it, for he rose to his feet and drew Leonard on one side.

"If I were your age, Lister," he said, turning to me, "I should ask Miss Mindel to drift about with me in one of those shadowy boats."

So Rose and I strolled down towards the lake.

" To think," she murmured, a little tremulously, " that very soon we shall come to the end of our adventures! "

I drew her arm through mine. The sound of the music was growing fainter in the distance and the ripple of the water was in our ears.

" Or to the beginning," I whispered.

## CONUNDRUM NUMBER SEVEN

### THE GREATEST ARGUMENT

THE clock had scarcely finished striking six when a two-seated car, throaty but sonorous, came to a standstill in front of the house in Clarges Street where Rose, Leonard and I had our temporary abode. An elegantly dressed but weary young man was shown into our sitting room. He bowed to Rose and addressed me.

"You're Maurice Lister, what, and Mr. Leonard Cotton?" he began. "No use telling you my name because you wouldn't know it. I've brought you a message."

I indicated a chair but our visitor shook his head.

"Got to be tooting off in a moment," he continued. "I have just come from the old man. He's in a nursing home round the corner."

"What, Mr. Thomson?" I exclaimed.

The young man assented, although at the mention of the name he winced.

"They nearly laid him out last night in Lansdowne Passage," he announced. "Fortunately, I wasn't far away. Number 100, John Street. He'd like you there in a quarter of an hour, Mr. Lister."

"But who laid him out?" I asked. "Is he seriously hurt?"

Leonard intervened, holding out a newspaper.

"There's an account here!" he exclaimed. "'Murderous assault in Lansdowne Passage.' They say the victim, name unknown, is in a precarious condition."

"Was that really Mr. Thomson?" Rose demanded, in a shocked tone.

"Less said, less trouble," the young man replied, embracing us all in a common farewell salute. "So long."

He took his leave, lit a cigarette on the kerb, assumed an almost horizontal position in the car, and shot like a rocket into the heart of the Piccadilly traffic. In rather less than

five minutes I was ringing the bell at Number 100, John Street, and after a very brief delay was taken upstairs to a cool and pleasantly furnished bedroom. Mr. Thomson, almost undistinguishable for bandages, motioned to a chair by his bedside and the nurse departed.

"They pretty nearly got me this time, Lister," he remarked.

Curiosity mastered sympathy.

"Who did?" I asked breathlessly.

Mr. Thomson lay quite still, with his eyes fixed upon the ceiling.

"A little company of men," he said, "who are dangerous fellows to deal with — very dangerous," he repeated pensively.

"Are you badly hurt?"

He shook his head.

"I am scarcely hurt at all."

"The newspapers," I began ——

"Inspired."

"You are on the side of the law this time, then!" I exclaimed triumphantly.

He smiled.

"I confess it. The newspapers which speak of my perilous condition exaggerate. Never-

theless," he went on, "I have decided to spend a week here. The surroundings are pleasant and the rest is good. During that week you will take my place."

"The devil I shall!" I murmured, gazing at his head swathed with bandages.

"One reason," Mr. Thomson condescended to explain, "for my retirement from an active pursuit of — shall we call it my hobby? — is that, notwithstanding my repeated efforts to keep it in the background, my personality has become too well known amongst the inner circle of those against whom our energies are directed. In this present instance, the scene for a very stirring little drama in the history of to-day is laid in a comparatively small manufacturing town in the heart of Yorkshire. Whatever form of disguise I might select, my presence in that place would certainly be detected. Besides, the task before us is one in which direct action is impossible. We can only bait the trap and wait, and if the quarry refuses to enter, we must choose another trap and another bait. A good deal will rest with you, Lister. If you are completely successful

in the undertaking which I shall presently disclose to you, you will receive a parting gift of ten thousand pounds for division amongst the three of you."

"It is princely," I acknowledged enthusiastically.

"If you succeed," Mr. Thomson continued, "it is a flea bite. Now leave me. To-morrow you will depart for the Grand Hotel at Blackham. Before midnight to-night you will receive from me a written report which will contain all the information you require. Read it, commit it to memory and destroy it. If you need further advice or help, do not hesitate to apply to me. There is a telephone here at my elbow, and I shall never be so ill as the papers may lead you to believe. Good fortune to you!"

I left our chief and returned to Clarges Street, impressed with a conviction that we were about to enter upon the most important enterprise which had yet come our way.

We found Blackham hideous, uninspiring, yet not without a certain impressiveness. It

was situated in the midst of a district black with coal shafts and forges which squatted upon the ground, festering sores in the daytime, like drops from a spilt hell at night, when the roar of their flames was like a fiery wind, and the red vomit of their furnaces stained the very clouds. There were never-ending electric cars, linking up a whole series of town-villages, more public houses than I had ever seen before, a plethora of libraries and a perfect plague of cinema palaces. Day and night the streets were thronged. Food and living were inordinately dear but money was plentiful, although everywhere there seemed brooding over the place the shadow of that sullen storm of industrial unrest with which in those days the whole country was agitated. The shops, the cinema palaces, the theatre itself and the smaller music halls were packed every night. We only obtained a hall for our own performance with the utmost difficulty, and for our rooms and sitting room at the so-called Grand Hotel, which was little more than a glorified public house, we had to pay as much as though we were at a West End hotel. We advanced the

price of the seats, however, at the building in which our performance was given, and were rewarded by finding the place packed on the first night. The only empty places were in the cheaper seats.

Late that night, Leonard and I came across a very valuable acquaintance, Arthur Rastall, a journalist on a London paper, a man whom I had known for years and who hailed from Leonard's part of the world. He visited our sitting room for a final whisky and soda, and he helped us to understand the somewhat tense atmosphere of the place.

"What on earth are you doing here?" was almost the first question I asked him.

He filled his pipe and lit it.

"I am here," he replied, "because during the course of the next few days history will be made in this most unattractive town. I am not alone, either. Fisher is here from *The Times,* Simpson from *The Post,* and I passed the *Express* man in the town this afternoon."

"A Labour conference?" I asked.

"Something even more than that. These devils have got something up their sleeves.

They have some reason for meeting in a small place like this, and meeting privately. There's something brewing."

"What sort of a something?" I asked. "Is it a secret from two harmless strolling players?"

"No secret at all that I know of," our friend replied gruffly, "except from the Government, who won't believe it, and Scotland Yard, who don't know how to act. They say that Creslin is coming, and two representatives from America."

I suppose I still looked a little puzzled, although what Rastall was telling us was not altogether news. He went on after a moment's pause.

"Every country," he explained, "has been able to deal with its own Labour question more or less successfully, except Russia. The greatest danger the world might have to face would be an internationalisation of so-called Labour. Creslin is the apostle of internationalisation."

"Do you mean Creslin, the Bolshevist?" Leonard demanded — "the man whom the

Prime Minister referred to as the Horror of the World?"

"The same," was the grim admission.

"But how is it that that man is free to walk the streets of any English town?" Leonard persisted. "I should have thought such a criminal could have been shot anywhere."

"I don't think there is any offence against the English law under which he could be charged," Rastall declared. "Every port was watched, and they did try to keep him out of the country. They hadn't a chance, though. He was far too clever for them."

The story of Creslin's coming was already known to me, but I asked Rastall a question which had been in my mind all the time.

"Tell me what there is against the Government putting a bold front on the matter, arresting Creslin, and deporting him as an undesirable alien?"

"Just this. The whole country just now is in a dangerously inflammatory state. The committees for settling Labour disputes worked well enough at first, but so much of this false, socialistic literature, anarchistic

stuff, has made its way into the country during the last few years, that Labour, fat and well-fed and surfeited with pleasure, is more dangerous to-day than it was in the old days of starvation. Wages to-day are an enormous tax upon capital, but you know what the screaming Bolshevist is. He wants all the time to kill the goose that lays the golden egg; he wants to pull down the capitalist and reign in his stead. If ever he succeeded, as he did in Russia, England would be industrially and commercially ruined."

"Yet even with that certainty before us, you mean to tell me that the Government is going to let Creslin meet the heads of all the trades unions here and pour his filth down their throats?"

"Seems like it," was Rastall's laconic reply.

There was a knock at the door. The manager of the hotel presented himself. Behind him stood another and a slighter figure. The former glanced around the apartment and with a little bow drew me on one side.

"Can I have a word with you, Mr. Lister?"

"Get right on with it," I invited.

"I wondered if by any chance you could be induced to give up your sitting room? It happens to be the only one I have in the house, and we have a very distinguished visitor from abroad, just arrived, who objects to the public rooms."

"Sorry," I said firmly, "but I took the rooms for a week, as you know, and a sitting room is an absolute necessity to us."

The manager glanced at his companion. The latter came a little forward. He was a fair, quiet-looking man, clean-shaven, moody, with light-coloured hair brushed back from his forehead. He was at first glance almost prepossessing. He had the nervous mouth and quick smile of an artist. It was only his rather light-coloured eyes which left one a little doubtful about him.

"It is on my behalf that the manager is speaking," he said. "I have the good or evil fortune to bear a name which in an industrial neighbourhood like this is somewhat too well known. I am Paul Creslin."

Somehow or other I had already surmised the fact, and I was able to control my coun-

tenance. Rose had dropped her newspaper and was studying the newcomer with interest. He seemed to observe her for the first time, and a look crept into his eyes which stamped him at once in my mind. There is a certain type of profligacy which is self-revealing. I felt myself in a quandary. My hatred of the man was already born and the words of dismissal were quivering upon my lips. Then I remembered my mission. I remembered Thomson's words — "Success is born of the brain and wrecked by impulse." I choked back the impulse.

"I am not a politician," I said, "but your name is of course known to me. I cannot offer you our sitting room, for the simple reason that there is no other place in the hotel for the young lady, but any time you would care to take refuge here we should be very pleased, and if you happen to be a late person, it will be at your disposal after twelve o'clock."

The manager glanced anxiously at his guest. Again the latter's eyes rested for a moment upon Rose, and he seemed satisfied.

"You are most courteous," he acknowl-

edged. "I am going to my room for a few minutes. Afterwards I shall venture to intrude."

The two men left the room, followed a few minutes later by Rastall, in hot haste for the telegraph office. Leonard's expression, as he looked at me, was almost of horror. Rose, too, seemed troubled.

"What on earth do you mean, Maurice," she exclaimed, "by asking us even to breathe the same air as that hateful person?"

I thrust Leonard into a chair by Rose's side and stood on the shabby little bit of hearth rug, close to them.

"The time has come," I said, addressing myself particularly to Rose, "for me to pass on to you the chief's instructions."

In the days that followed, we seemed to have caught up into our own apparently uneventful lives something of that spirit of waiting drama which pervaded the teeming town and the smoke-stained countryside. The people all seemed to be waiting for something. We, too, waited, and in the meantime Creslin made free

use of our sitting room, drove out with us in the car which I had hired for a week, and never failed to attend our performances. Our sitting room was almost a bower of roses and orchids, flowers which arrived in mysterious parcels from London and which must have cost a small fortune. I ventured to protest on the grounds of political economy, but Creslin only smiled.

"Every man is allowed one extravagance in life," he said. "You and your friend, for instance, drink wine and whisky and soda and smoke cigars. I do neither. My weakness lies elsewhere."

He glanced across at Rose as he spoke, and at the expression in his eyes, the slow, amorous, calculating expression, I had to grip the sides of my chair and look down at the carpet towards some spilt tobacco ash, to hide my fury. Creslin, who had been strolling uneasily around the room, seated himself on the sofa by Rose's side.

"You love flowers, Miss Mindel?" he asked softly, following the direction of her eyes, which were resting upon a bowl of red roses.

"I adore them," she acknowledged, "for

their own sake — and sometimes, too," she went on, meeting his gaze with a coquetry for which I could never have given her credit, " sometimes, too, for the sake of those from whom they come."

He glanced almost imperceptibly towards Leonard and myself, one of those slow, inimical glances which seemed yet to betray some evil purpose. Bearing in mind the stories which one had been told of this man's cold-blooded and indiscriminate cruelty, it was easy to believe that if a word from him could have wiped us off the face of the earth at that moment, it would certainly have been spoken. Making the best of our presence, however, he continued his conversation in a low tone. Once I saw Rose flinch and glance up as though in distress. I came across the room, making a pretence at filling my pipe from a jar which stood upon a table near them. Creslin looked at me through his half-closed eyes.

" Miss Mindel does not approve of the coming emancipation of her sex," he observed. " I suppose the doctrines of the new world must sound strange at first to those who have

counted the hard and fast chastity of the Puritan amongst the virtues."

"What are the doctrines of the new world?" I enquired.

"They include, at any rate," he replied, in his quiet, sibilant voice, "a complete reconstruction of the relations between man and woman."

"That sounds like Bolshevism, pure and simple," Leonard remarked bluntly.

"The actual principles of Bolshevism," Creslin asserted, "contain more than a germ of the truth."

"I should be sorry," I declared, "for the man who made a serious attempt to wipe out the marriage laws of this country."

He looked at me with a cynical turn of his thin lips.

"There was never a race of people in the world," he pronounced, "who hugged their chains like the British. In their hearts they love the lash of authority. Think. For generations their leaders, their prophets and their preachers have been drawn from one class only, the class which they are accustomed to

obey. The people have never found their Rienzi in politics, in literature or in sociology. That is because of the age-long snobbishness of the Englishman. During the last ten years, for the first time, the people have kicked over the traces so far as regards their material prosperity. They are being fed with doles and pittances but they are moving forward. Soon they will begin to think. Then, just as they have asserted themselves in material ways, they will begin to demand an active voice in the reconstruction of Society."

"What is your substitute for the marriage laws?" Rose asked him bluntly.

To do him justice, I must say that he spoke with the conviction of one who enunciates the most obvious truths, truths which did not even admit of argument.

"Union between man and woman," he explained, "is intended for the production of children. The only sane restraint which common sense should place upon this connection is the presence of human affection. That is the only restraint there should be."

"I see," Leonard murmured. "And what would become of the children?"

"They are for the State — children of the State," was the almost wondering reply. "Every household should have its nursery. For every child born, a State grant should be given."

"Is there any literature," I enquired, "setting out these altruistic views?"

"There is," Creslin replied, after a moment's pause. "The time is scarcely ripe, however, for its dissemination. If you would care to possess a text book, drawn up by myself and embodying the principles which I desire sooner or later to be accepted by the whole world, I will present you with one."

Before we went to bed that night, the precious pamphlet was in our possession.

The presence of Creslin in the country was now universally admitted by the Press, although his exact whereabouts did not once appear in print. The day fixed for the Congress of Labour leaders, to be held at Blackham, drew near. Meanwhile, Creslin was watched by detectives and press men alike. It

occurred to us more than once that he almost expected and certainly hoped for arrest. I spoke on this matter to Rastall.

" There is nothing Creslin desires so much," he pointed out, " as to pose as a martyr over here. Until he begins to preach his abominable doctrines or disseminate his literature, he is on the side of the law. The sociology he preaches, apart from its sexual side, is reasonable and even finely conceived."

" Supposing he were to be arrested? " I asked.

" The police would never get him out of town," Rastall replied. " There are a million of his followers within a radius of twenty miles from here. I think we should see a riot that would approach almost to a revolution. The man is as cunning as a fox. He will preach his idealistic sociology first. The rest will creep in by degrees."

Meanwhile, Creslin spent the greater part of his spare time in our sitting room. He scarcely now made a pretence of taking any particular interest in either Leonard or myself. His whole attention was directed

towards Rose. To do him justice, he was a man of considerable culture and fine perceptions on many subjects. There were times when Rose's face seemed to light up, when she seemed to find a genuine pleasure in his conversation. There were others when I saw her cold and wooden, parrying the unspoken pleadings of his meretricious philosophy with a skill for which I should never have given her credit. It was evident that Creslin was very much in earnest indeed. He was continually inviting her to lunch, to motor, to leave the hotel alone with him, all of which invitations she contrived to evade. In the end, he even had the effrontery to appeal to me.

"I gather," he said, one morning, "that Miss Rose Mindel is nothing to either of you who are her companions."

"She is nothing to us," I replied, "except a very dear sister who has a claim upon our joint protection."

"I will not conceal from you," he continued, "that I have the greatest admiration for Miss Mindel — I might even venture to say affection."

I received the confession in silence. He seemed much less at his ease than usual.

"I have met with no woman," he went on, "in whose companionship I could find more joy."

"Then why don't you ask her to marry you?" I demanded.

He looked at me with his narrow eyes almost wide open.

"You are a little ignorant of the way things are moving in the world," he said quietly. "You are wrapped up, perhaps — in your art. I am Creslin. To-morrow, if I chose, I could be dictator of Russia or Germany, Hungary or Austria. It pleases me instead to be the spokesman of my class in every country of the world. I do not understand the word 'marriage'."

I had never harder work in controlling my temper, but I knew that the time had not yet come. I answered him a little abruptly.

"I am afraid you will find some of us a little insular. Miss Mindel is of course free to make her own decisions in life, but it is as well, perhaps, to impress upon you the fact

that whilst she is travelling with us we consider ourselves, Mr. Cotton and I, her guardians. We should resent forcibly any offer to her which was not in accordance with the established conventions."

He smiled in maddening fashion.

"You speak like the hero of one of those melodramas in which I used to revel when I was a youthful student in London. What I choose to say to Miss Mindel I shall say. It will be a strange thing to me if she refuses to listen. Be sensible, my young friend, and remember."

"Remember what?" I demanded.

"Who I am," he answered, with cool and splendid assurance. "I carry the burden of the new world upon my shoulders. I am the future dictator of all human Society."

That finished my scruples. I went off with Leonard and discussed our plans. Creslin, with all the priceless imperturbability of his sublime conceit, remained in our sitting room, waiting for Rose.

On the day before the great Conference, Creslin was a busy man. All the time he was

back and forth between the temporary offices arranged for the reception of the delegates and the hotel. When we returned to the sitting room after our evening performance, he was still absent. The three of us held a little consultation. We were all of one mind.

"On general principles," Rose agreed, "I think that Creslin is a detestable person, and I should like to see him publicly disgraced for ever. On the other hand, I don't think," she went on, with a little grimace, "that I was cut out for a Delilah. So far, my conscience is clear enough. I have never given him a word of encouragement, and if he were to insult me he would deserve any punishment my guardians might choose to inflict. But what does make me unhappy is the idea that I might have to deceive him even by my silence if ——"

"But listen," Leonard interrupted eagerly, "I heard him distinctly whispering to you that to-morrow was to be his great day; all that he needed was inspiration, that he must carry with him on to the platform memories and hopes — and a lot of slush of that sort."

Rose nodded.

"Quite right," she assented. "I promised that I would not go to bed to-night until I had seen him. I am sure he will be here presently."

"Very well, then," I decided, "he shall have his chance. If he is just ordinarily offensive, he shall get the hiding he deserves, as publicly as possible, and the chief must be satisfied with that. If he attempts anything else — well, we are prepared."

Leonard was out of the room for a few minutes, and Rose held out a hand to me a little tremulously.

"Maurice," she said, and there was a look of trouble in her dear eyes, "I don't like this. I hate that man near me. I hate the idea that I may have to listen to horrible things from him."

"And I hate the thought of your doing it," I answered firmly. "Say the word, Rose, and we'll finish here. The pamphlet's enough. Any reasonable Englishman would be justified in giving him a thrashing for that."

She shook her head regretfully.

" The other is better, of course; only swear that you will not leave me alone for five seconds."

" I can promise that," I told her grimly.

After all, we need not have troubled ourselves with scruples. Creslin had made his own plans and made them with devilish cunning. At midnight, as we had seen nothing of him, I sent down an enquiry and was told that he had come in quite exhausted and gone at once to his room. To Leonard and me the news sounded natural enough. Rose's instinct, however, was not to be denied.

" I know that he meant what he said about to-night," she assured us uneasily. " Swear that you will be near, Maurice."

We promised, and soon afterwards she retired. Her bedroom adjoined the sitting room, and after she had passed through the connecting door we heard the click of the turning key on the other side. The outside door, opening upon the corridor, was secured by a bolt. It certainly seemed as though she could have no cause for fear. Leonard and I, however, took up our vigil behind a black

lacquer screen at the farther end of the room. We heard the slow dying away of the footsteps upon the pavement below, the lessening scream of the electric cars, and finally silence. One o'clock struck, and half-past. We had both of us given up the idea that anything was likely to happen, when the door of the sitting room was quietly opened, and Creslin, in his dressing gown and slippers, entered. He stood listening for a moment, as though to make sure that he had not been followed. Then he turned on the electric light, drew a key from his pocket — a new, shining key — rubbed it with a little oil, and stole across the room towards the door which led into Rose's apartment. He essayed no knock, no whispered invitation. He fitted the key noiselessly into the lock, turned it softly and disappeared. In five seconds we heard the sound of her muffled cry. In ten we had dragged him out into the sitting room. He lay on the carpet, looking at us with frightened eyes, and that expression upon his face which had so often puzzled me now made clear. The man was a coward.

"What are you going to do?" he whimpered.

"Horsewhip you first," I told him, "and afterwards punish you. I shouldn't call out, if I were you," I added, as he opened his lips. "There's the skeleton key still in the door there, and the hotel is full of journalists. Better make up your mind to go through with it."

"If you do me an injury," he cried, "the people to-morrow will tear you limb from limb."

"Get up," I ordered roughly. "We're taking our chance about that."

Mr. Thomson presided over our usual banquet, a few evenings later, in the dining room of a suite at the Ritz. He was a little gaunt and pale, but otherwise showed few signs of his indisposition. By the side of the plate of each one of us was an envelope, which he begged us not to open until the end of the festivities.

"You three," he said musingly, "especially you, Lister, have put your finger upon one of

the quaintest features of the psychology of these days. Reason and argument, common sense, statesmanlike appeal, may all fail. It is ridicule alone which kills. You three, my trusted confederates, have probably prevented a revolution. You have brought to an end in ridicule and disgust a great social upheaval."

"Helped by the Press," I reminded him.

"Helped by the Press, without a doubt," he assented. "Their tone was in every respect admirable. The *Daily Hour* cartoon of Creslin, the pure-minded idealist, staggering to his feet from the bench in the Town Hall Square, tarred and feathered, a disgraced debauchee, with fragments of his pamphlet sticking in pieces to his body, and another copy of it hung around his neck, was the most wonderful thing in educational journalism. All the same, Lister, you had a narrow escape. It was the women who saved you."

"The women and again the Press," I reminded him. "Just as the people themselves were hesitating, the morning papers came out

with a humourous recital of the true story and a digest of the pamphlet. Creslin could never again present a heroic picture to any one. The only earthly chance he ever had of posing successfully as a prophet of the new social law would have been the possession of a personal character of unblemished purity."

"At the same time," Mr. Thomson observed, a little gravely, "I want you to remember this. Creslin has many friends of his own ilk, friends who knew his real character and who were indifferent. I think a short sea voyage would be good for you and Miss Mindel, at any rate. I will speak of that again presently."

I met Rose's eyes, and with the knowledge that our compact ended that evening I attempted no more concealment. She looked for a moment startled — and then I knew.

"As this is our last official reunion," our host continued, "I am reminded that there are a good many questions which you have asked me at various times during our association, the answers to which I have postponed

until this evening. Question me now as much as you will."

"Let me start," Rose begged. "I asked the first question, remember. When you arrested Mountjoy, for whom were you acting? Were you for the police, or just an ordinary informer?"

"For neither," was the calm reply. "I have been for ten years the head of the Home Secret Service, an institution, I believe," he added, "which is never mentioned, and which not one person in a thousand knows anything about. The Secret Service still possesses the minute book I found on Mountjoy. If it had come into the hands of the police, they would have been compelled to have taken indiscriminate action and the results would have been disastrous."

"The jewels which you took from Kinlosti?" I asked.

"They were sold, and the amount stands to the credit of the Secret Service funds."

"What became of the treasure which was found in the Spens chateau?"

"It was all returned to its various owners.

The Baroness sought my aid because she, too, is a member of our Secret Service."

"And Naida?"

"There was one of our complete successes," Mr. Thomson replied. "No court could have tried Kansky. There was no possible way in which he could have been brought to book for his crimes. The Secret Service undertook to dispose of him and it did."

"And what about the boy Arthur Dompers and his tutor Duncombe?" Rose asked.

"A little outside our ordinary course of business," Mr. Thomson admitted. "Some one or other, however, managed to convince Scotland Yard that Duncombe meant mischief, and I took the matter up to oblige them."

"What about the Duke and the Lorringham jewels?" Leonard enquired.

"That affair was passed over to my supervision," our chief explained, "because the Lorringham jewels are looked upon as a sort of national asset in the country, and their retention here is considered advisable for diplomatic reasons."

"Tell us," Rose begged, "exactly the meaning of the attack upon you in the Landsdowne Passage."

Mr. Thomson made a little grimace.

"It simply means," he admitted, "that the agents of the Black Peril have a secret service almost equal to our own. They flattered me so far as to believe that I was the only man likely to render abortive the great stroke which Creslin intended to deliver here. Hence their endeavour to anticipate my activities."

"You seem to have unlimited powers," Leonard said thoughtfully. "Doesn't it ever occur to you, sir, to make wider use of them? For instance, every Englishman knows Creslin was a terrible danger to the country. He stood for revolution, disorganisation and anarchy. Why didn't you have him secretly put out of the way?"

"Because the men who share with me the responsibilities of my position," Mr. Thomson replied, "my lieutenants and coadjutors, are men of imagination. We try to see a little beyond the actual circumstances with which

we are confronted. It would have been the easiest matter in the world for us to have wiped Creslin from the face of the earth, but if we had done so, his principles would have lived after him. Everything except the man's corporal frame would have survived. To-day, a certain amount of the fascination of his doctrines has perished in the morass of ridicule which has sucked the man under. His doctrines never had a moment's chance in this country unless they were preached by a man of personal purity. We did better than slay Creslin. We made him ridiculous."

"What made you first approach us at Cromer?" Rose asked, with a touch of feminine curiosity. "What was there about us, I mean, which made you think we might be useful?"

"The fact, perhaps, that you looked so innocuous," was the smiling reply. "I have agents in many walks of life, and the one thing I aim at as much as possible is to select recruits who not only appear simple-minded and innocent, but who actually are. You are none of you intriguers by disposition; you are

simple English gentlepeople. You have escaped suspicion many times for this reason and have therefore been able to succeed, when any ordinary agent would have been suspected from the first."

"I see," Rose murmured.

"You will gratify me," Mr. Thomson suggested, "if you open your envelopes."

We obeyed. Then I saw what I had never dreamed of seeing in my life — not one but five thousand-pound Bank of England notes.

"I have treated you all the same," our benefactor said. "I hope that you will never regret this year out of your lives. I have answered all your conundrums. I will now ask you one. What are you going to do with your money?"

"I don't know," Rose gasped.

"I am going to buy a share in my father's business and go back to the wine trade," Leonard decided. "Half this money will make a new man of him."

"I am going to marry Rose," I declared.

"But you haven't asked me!" she protested indignantly.

I glanced at Leonard.

"The year's up, I suppose, old fellow," he said, with a sigh. "We both ask you to marry us, Rose."

"Bolshevists!" she exclaimed.

"I mean we ask you to choose," he corrected.

She gave me her hand. Leonard drank a glass of champagne in gloomy silence and afterwards shook hands with both of us. Rose and he exchanged a few earnest sentences. Mr. Thomson spoke a valedictory word.

"My friends," he said, "to-night we part. I have helped, I hope, to bring colour into your lives. I ask but one thing of you in return, and that is — silence for twelve months."

We promised, and we kept our word.

THE END

## NOVELS *by* E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

"He is past master of the art of telling a story. He has humor, a keen sense of the dramatic, and a knack of turning out a happy ending just when the complications of the plot threaten worse disasters." —*The New York Times.*

"Mr. Oppenheim has few equals among modern novelists. He is prolific, he is untiring in the invention of mysterious plots, he is a clever weaver of the plausible with the sensational, and he has the necessary gift of facile narrative."—*The Boston Transcript.*

---

A Prince of Sinners
A Maker of History
The Man and His Kingdom
The Yellow Crayon
A Sleeping Memory
The Great Secret
Jeanne of the Marshes
The Lost Ambassador
A Daughter of the Marionis
Havoc
The Lighted Way
The Survivor
A People's Man
Enoch Strone
The Vanished Messenger

The Way of These Women
The Kingdom of the Blind
The Hillman
The Pawns Count
The Zeppelin's Passenger
The Curious Quest
The Wicked Marquis
The Box with Broken Seals
The Great Impersonation
The Devil's Paw
Jacob's Ladder
The Profiteers
Nobody's Man
The Great Prince Shan
The Evil Shepherd

**Boston LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY Publishers**

456

56-